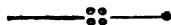


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ECHO ANSWERS

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MONEY OF HER OWN
THE CLEVER SISTER
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FALLEN AWAY
THE DOWRY

Margaret Culkin Banning

ECHO ANSWERS



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CHAPTER ONE

THE porter had trundled her luggage to a familiar place on the outside ramp of the Grand Central Station, where the chances of getting a taxi quickly ~~were~~ were best. Clare knew it well, although during the past few years she and Jerome had usually come to New York by air. But this was just as it used to be, with the same look and feeling. The shabby uniform of the weary-shouldered porter, the cold—it was always too cold or too hot when you got here—the curious mixture of excitement and let-down in arrival—and the look in the eyes of that young man who was watching her. He was the one who had tried to attract her attention when she went through the lounge car last night on her way to dinner. It's my furs, thought Clare with amusement. You can always fool men with furs, if your legs are still all right. He can't be more than thirty-five.

• She wanted none of him. As a person the stranger was obnoxious with his bold glance under the slanted hat, his cock-sure, cheap effort to get her to notice him. But being singled out for admiration, even by this tawdry character, was tonic. She was Mrs. Jerome Tarrant, on her way to the suite of rooms which had been reserved for her in a Park Avenue hotel. She had left far more beautiful rooms in her own house in St. Ives, and they would be ready for her when and if she

wanted to go back to them. Yet the stare of the man warmed her, because to him she was only someone slim and female, perfectly balanced on her tall leather heels, with curves of blonde hair and an expertly rouged mouth showing between the touches of veil and her fur coat collar. She thought, wouldn't he feel a fool if he knew my age? But age won't pigeon-hole me here the way it does back home.

She thought again, as she had done several times on the train, as soon as anonymity began to be possible, of what she was glad to be getting away from. From her lawyers, her bankers, from people she liked and some that she loved. From visits of condolence and invitations to small dinners that gave her a kind of claustrophobia. Also from advice.

"Of course you'll want to sell that big house."

"You'll be so much happier in an apartment now that you're alone."

— She would not have to listen to that for a while, nor feel the constant pressure on her to adjust to a resigned and cheerful widowhood. She was getting away from the general acceptance of Jerome's death, and now she could suffer as much as she wanted to, without people trying to stop it. She was escaping the hints that after seventy a man was more or less living on borrowed time and that passionate grief at sixty was unsuitable, almost ridiculous.

She and Jerome had paid little attention to age. Not that they had ever pretended to be younger than they were. But getting older did not frighten them nor deprive them of very much. They sometimes found it an advantage in their always interesting social and personal life. Jerome was still very handsome, right up to that last hideous day. And his pride in her had never dwindled. Her clothes, her flair for style delighted him. Of course they had made their wills. Jerome had chosen the lot on the hill where his body was lying now. But there had been nothing worrying or morbid about that. They joked about it, about who'd be there first, about crashing in an airplane together. Jerome's doctor had told him, when he had his last check-up, to go a little slower. And they had. They

didn't stay late at parties, especially if they were bored. They usually arrived late, but that was because of having had a cocktail together at home before they started.

"Here you are, miss," said the porter, snagging a cab out of a procession of them that was winding towards them. The careless title gave her the same absurd lift that Clare got from the appraising look of the man with the cavalier hat and the outrageous striped necktie. Her fellow traveller was still watching her legs as she stepped into the cab, and then the slam of the tinny door and the lurch forward disposed of him as far as Clare was concerned. She gave the driver the address of her hotel. He frowned and his shoulders looked surly. It wasn't much of a haul. Jerome would have noted the frown and probably said, "Don't worry, boy. You'll come out all right on the fare."

She would take care of the tip in Jerome's lavish fashion. Perhaps. She realized that the driver was making the distance from the station to the hotel longer than it needed to be. He didn't have to take this one-way street which would mean he would have to go over to Fifth and double back. Clare knew this part of New York like the palm of her hand. But she let him choose the route without protest. There was no hurry.

The taxi became immobile in the traffic when they turned again. The empty cavern of a huge truck joggled in front of it. Clare watched a boy wheeling a handcart hung with racks of sheeted clothes through the crevices between the automobiles. He made her feel that she really was back in New York. Those boys with carts of clothes never were seen anywhere else. The sign of a NEDICKS Orange Drink stand pleased her. Now, as they were moving again, she saw a familiar sign with painted letters, THE FRENCH BAG SHOP. This time I must go in and see what's there, she thought. I walked by that shop for years and never saw anyone go in or out. There will be hundreds of things to do here, things I always meant to do and never did. They will take my mind off myself. And Clare knew that although she craved freedom

in which to lose her grief, she also wanted to be rid of that grieving self.

At the next corner the street was torn up.

"Always working on the streets here, aren't they?" she said, as the driver relaxed to the comfort of his ticking meter.

"Lady, they've been destroying this town for years," he said. "I never seen a day when there wasn't a hole in the streets blocking traffic. And I've been driving a cab for twenty-one years."

He was driving a taxi before I married Jerome, thought Clare. We had almost eighteen years. All that time this man has been driving people to their jobs and their love-affairs, picking them up in happiness, in furies, never knowing their names, not caring what they were up to or might be planning—I wonder if he's driven me before. She saw herself, so many times standing on the streets of New York and signalling a cab to stop. In the rain, in a hurry that was needless after all, in love, worrying because she ought to take a bus but hailing a cab anyway.

"That's a long time," she said, and he repeated that it was twenty-one years. She subtracted from the present that would make it special. But the dates in which events happened were never very clear in her mind. Jerome used to laugh at her because she mixed up the dates of wars and treaties and depressions. "A girl who's supposed to be so brilliant ought to do better than that!"

Now she did not put her mind on 1907 and try to sort out its special happenings. Clare had never told her second husband that her confusion about dates and happenings was something she did not try to correct. She did not admit to herself that it was deliberate. But what was not placed in a time setting or definitely remembered had no power to hurt or shame.

As the taxi turned at last into Park Avenue it picked up speed, competing now with the swift and orderly flow of cars. At the next intersection a light changed to red, but a girl kept on running swiftly from the island in the middle of the

Avenue to the west kerb. Her skirt almost brushed the oncoming taxi and the driver angrily yelled at her. The girl's head turned and Clare caught the smile she tossed back, as if conceding that she shouldn't have taken the risk but with no apology for it. Clare leaned forward but there was not time enough to be sure. For a second she thought the girl was Belinda.

Of course it almost certainly wasn't her granddaughter. Girls of that age looked so much alike in those hooded tweed coats. Belinda had been wearing her hair straight back from her forehead, like that girl in the street, when Clare had last seen her. It was nearly a year ago now. Belinda Rood had not been blood kin to Jerome, but none the less and with sorrow she had come to his funeral.

She had not been much help. Her mother said so at the time. It was Julia Rood who took hold and managed most of the painful details. Julia Rood was always competent, whether in Congress or in private life. She was Clare's only child, born of her first, brief marriage to Tony Delchamp. Julia had come from Washington to St. Ives immediately when she heard of Jerome Tarrant's sudden death and taken over everything except the shock and grief. It was Julia who listed the flowers, greeted the mourners, and ordered sustaining meals.

Belinda had made no effort to be cordial to the people who called in sympathy and she had shuddered away from the flowers. She had worn a yellow sweater and skirt to the services. Her mother had wanted her to put on other clothes, something black or dark blue at a time like this, said Julia Rood. But Clare had said, "No—don't make her change—Jerome liked yellow." Clare remembered too that she had come upon Belinda later in Jerome's study. She was holding his favourite cigar-lighter, snapping it on, looking thoughtfully at the little flame. She looked so fond.

"Would you like to have that?" Clare asked.

"Oh, Clare, could I!" exclaimed Belinda.

I am not going to be a nuisance to Belinda while I'm in New York, thought Clare. I didn't come here to chaperone

her. Nor to interfere with her life. Julia should stop worrying and leave the girl alone. She's quite different from her mother, more like her father as I remember him. I'll see Belinda when she wants to see me, but I deliberately didn't tell her just when I was coming. If she wants to talk about herself and her problems, or asks for any help, that's different. And I'm going to give her a little money, a kind of financial backlog, as soon as I can get around to it.

But Belinda is twenty-one—my God, she must be twenty-two, is it possible? Her mother was married at that age. So was I the first time. If she is having a love affair, as Julia seems to think, what can anyone do about it? She's unmarried and this is New York. And Belinda is a girl to stir men. When she visited us, even the older men were conscious of her as soon as she came into a room. Furbishing their dusty desires—I said that to Jerome and how he laughed—I can always tell about men.

"Oh, here we are ----"

The driver pulled her luggage out of the trunk and the doorman took the alligator dressing-case into his personal custody at once, his welcome and respect proportioned to her expensive bags and long mink coat. She fumbled with change and then made the tip a dollar bill, telling herself as she did so that she must cut down on such things now. But at last the cabman smiled and Jerome's habits were being carried on a little longer.

The clerk at the desk was a new one, as the doorman had been. But the elevator boy knew her. He had been in one of these elevator cages for years.

"Well, good morning, Mrs. Tarrant. How are you? Glad to see you back."

"It's good to be here again, Harry. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you, ma'am."

"And the twins?" One of the things Clare remembered accurately was people's families.

"Growing up. They're in seventh grade."

"I can't believe it, Harry. They were babies!"

The bellhop had brought in her luggage. Harry hesitated with his hand on the lever, and questioned, "Mr. coming?"

"No," said Clare. "Mr. Tarrant isn't with me. He died last March, Harry."

"I'm certainly sorry to hear that. He was a wonderful man. Why he looked just fine when——"

"It was a heart attack. It was very sudden."

Harry's manner had become grave, hushed. The bellhop looked soberly down at the labels on the luggage. Clare thought, each time I have to tell a person who doesn't know, Jerome dies again. He was alive to Harry just a minute ago. Harry was expecting to see him come into the elevator, bringing that feeling he gave to people that they could count on him, that he was important and friendly and kind. It wasn't just that he looked successful and affluent—he gave everyone a sense that the good things of life were real.

"This way, Mrs. Tarrant, 1618."

"Oh, they've given me 1618?"

"It's one of our very best suites."

"I know."

"It's just been done over," he told her.

Clare went through the little foyer. Done over it might be, but there was still a brocaded bench against one wall and a cherry table with a mirror above it on the opposite side. The brocade was ivory-coloured. It used to be red. While the boy placed her cases on racks, hung up her coat and checked the refrigerator in the little pantry-bar, Clare looked for change. Absently she told the boy that she wanted nothing more now. She was thinking that unless they tore down the building, these rooms couldn't be altered very much. The long living-room, with its row of windows on two sides and the false fireplace at the far end decided how the chairs and sofas must be placed and demanded many of them. The fabrics were different from what they had been the last time she was here, the carpeting was paler. But the effect was what it had always been, of space as a tribute to wealth, of more dignity and

privacy than most people were allowed in a hotel. It was old-fashioned luxury. That was what Jerome had liked about it. A couple of modern love-seats, a few unintelligible pictures and a television set didn't change its character.

She thought, the room needs flowers. It demands them. I'll have to buy them for myself now. It might have made more sense for me to have taken a bedroom at the Club. That's what so many widows do. That's the reason why I didn't. I won't. Not yet. Or I might have gone to the St. Regis—Jerome and I never stayed there together. I used to take important clients there for lunch when I was working. Better not go to that hotel now. I used to love the little one near Washington Square. But you change. I changed completely after I married Jerome. You can't get back into a skin you've shed. And this was our place. Empty as it feels, I'd rather be here. How often did we have these rooms? The first time was just after we were married.

That first time Jerome Tarrant had closed the door on two satisfied porters and said, "Is this going to be all right?"

"Darling, you're going to turn my head. This is fabulous. What does it cost?"

"Never you mind."

"Is that big white article really a grand piano?"

"Looks like it."

"Then I'll have to take music lessons."

He laughed. He said, "The only lessons you need are in being a wife."

"Am I doing so badly!"

"Not too badly. But I can't seem to make you realize that you have a man to take care of you now."

"I know. I'm so used to doing things for myself and figuring the expense. When you signed the register for us both downstairs—it's still hard to believe."

"You don't know how proud I was when I wrote Mr. and Mrs. Tarrant at the desk. With you there beside me. Tell me, you like to be my wife, don't you?"

He was a big man, but when emotion came over him, his hands would tremble. As he held her close they became quiet and firm again. When he was reassured that she was happy, there was a foundation under everything. Jerome began to give his attention to details.

"Now we have to get organized," he said.

"The organization man," said Clare. "Look—there are pigeons outside the window."

"I must call the valet and give him this suit I've been wearing. And the shoes that should be shined."

"Do you suppose they are carrier pigeons?"

"Don't fall out of that window!"

"I think they're good luck."

"Shall I wear a blue or grey suit down to the city? Which would you like me in best?"

She said grey, not that it mattered. But Jerome wanted to do everything now in the full light of her agreement and approval.

"Are you going to abandon me?"

"You'll want to rest. And I think I should go down and get in touch with some of our people. They know I'm going to be here and they'll want to hear the details about the new power plant."

He loved her but he was not a man to sit around with a woman in the morning. She knew that.

"And I have to get my girl some flowers."

Clare said, "Look, you don't have to spend a fortune on flowers for me. You've got me."

"You certainly are going to have some flowers," said Jerome.

The first consignment came within half an hour after he left, sent by special messenger and marked HASTE. And later Jerome must have seen another florist's shop for more boxes of flowers were delivered. By noon the room bloomed with

white chrysanthemums, with yellow roses, several dozen white carnations—he wanted to wear one in his buttonhole usually—a pot of gardenias, heavy-headed anemones which had caught his attention and so he wanted Clare to see them too, and of course a perfect white orchid for her to wear this evening. There were too many flowers to manage easily, and most of the stems were too long for the commonplace hotel vases which the maid brought. Clare arranged and rearranged them. It was more fun than unpacking. Also she read the messages that came with the flowers and each card sent her thoughts over their long and rugged love. Jerome was sentimental and yet somehow never tinpan or silly.

“Darling,” he had written on the card which came with the yellow roses and troublesome anemones—“*these are to welcome you to New York and bring the hope that you will be happier here this time than ever before with your husband Jerome.*”

With the white orchid, “*For Clare, who becomes more beautiful every day—wear this with my love—Jerome.*”

The card with the unnecessary gardenias—Clare finally made them doubly lovely by putting the pot in front of the mirror in the foyer—read simply and ridiculously at the moment, “*Don’t forget me, Jerome.*”

That was an intimate phrase between them, the password of hope. They often had used it during the years of frustration. Listening to the pigeons cooing outside the hotel window, Clare felt the insistence of the words again. She was a bride of only a few weeks. She was a woman well into her middle years. No one has ever been better served by love, she thought—and put the card into the pocket of her dressing-case. She usually saved the cards that came with flowers from Jerome. She had a big collection of them.

It was very peaceful in the luxurious room. She hung up her clothes in one of the vast wardrobes, treating them with the same respect and care that she had given them when a good dress was a gamble or an important investment. Her own serenity surprised her this morning. Clare had been slightly

apprehensive about this first return to New York as Mrs. Jerome Tarrant. She was pleased to find that she did not feel either restless or uncomfortably idle. She did not even want to call up Claude Gregory, to whom she had sold her literary agency, and ask him how things were going.

The Delchamp Agency, which her first husband had established and which Clare had continued with such success after his death, did not belong to her any more. That still seemed strange but she had no twinge of nostalgia or regret. She was no longer Clare Delchamp. She had wondered if she would miss being that woman, miss her exciting if difficult life. Not of course during the past month, while she and Jerome were sailing tropical seas, adventuring and loving. The last weeks had been different from any that Clare had ever known, new to her experience in their pride and safety. But to come back to New York, where she had worked so hard for years, as a protected wife was a test. Clare knew that Jerome had been concerned about it. Now and then he had needed reassurance.

She could give it to him now for she felt it herself. She thought, he need never worry. Loving him, living with him is enough. I like myself better now. Did I ever really like Clare Delchamp? I made her put up a good front but I wonder if I quite trusted her or was sure that she wouldn't let me down. I'm glad to be rid of her and of the agency. Of course the business had served its purpose. It made it possible for me to give Julia a home and an education. It gave me living and a chance to know some amazing people. It could make me feel important and necessary. I had to feel that way to keep going. For years I've been facing up to other people's problems, working out deals for them, struggling with prices and markets. I've had to be shrewd and on guard, even against myself. Now that's no longer necessary. Life with Jerome is so straightforward, so valid. She went over it again mentally, just to remind herself. I couldn't have kept on with the agency and be married to Jerome. Even if we had managed to work out some routine so that I could go on commuting between

New York and St. Ives, as I've done for years more or less, it would have failed. My kind of job couldn't be handled impersonally. Writers need so much attention. They have to be watched and straightened out at critical times. Lee Havighurst was going through one when I sold the agency. He was beginning to think he doesn't need an agent because so many editors want his work. That problem intrigued Clare only for a moment before she tossed it away. Havighurst and his moods and vanities were no longer her responsibility. He merely proved that to continue with the agency would have been impossible.

For Jerome wants me with him, she thought. Always available. Marriage takes much more time than love. I've found that out already. It was a sweet thought and she lingered with it. Thinking, I am going to give him the kind of home he's never had—the kind I've never had—spacious, gay, untroubled. It will be completely different from living in that mausoleum with Helen. Some of her friends will probably resent me at first. They know Jerome's been in love with me for years. But he did everything possible for Helen as long as she lived. He has nothing to regret as far as she's concerned. I must make sure that no sense of guilt ever creeps in. I couldn't live with that.

Suddenly the taste of injustice was in her mind. It still could rise when Jerome was not with her. She must get rid of it. It made no sense now. She hung the last dresses in the wardrobe and decided to go out. There was an exhibition of fabrics in the Museum of Modern Art and it might give her ideas for the furnishing of the new house. Jerome probably would not be back until late afternoon.

But he was there when she returned at four o'clock. As she opened the door she got a whiff of cigar smoke, saw the newspaper tossed down beside the pot of gardenias. For a second she paused, to enjoy the destruction of loneliness, to feel her right to intimacy.

"Clare?"

"Who else?"

"Well, thank the Lord you're back!" said Jerome as she appeared.

"I didn't expect you'd be here so early."

"I couldn't stay away. And I've been worrying about you for"—he looked at his watch—"more than half an hour."

"Worried? Why on earth?"

"Because you were running around New York by yourself."

"I lived here for years, if you remember."

"That was different." He studied her face. "Is everything all right?"

"I've been looking at the most beautiful things for our house."

"Oh my darling," said Jerome, and was confident again.

His handsome head was a little grey, but he had the excitement of a boyish lover in this meeting. In any meeting with her. It never lessened. It infused the commonplace things he did, making a drink for her, moving her chair closer. It was the undertone of their talk.

"Thank you for the lovely flowers."

"Are they all right? Did you get an orchid?"

"Two men and a boy carried it in. It's a splendour. Did you have a good day?"

"Yes. But they're all talking war. We may get into it."

"Paul thinks we should. It worries Julia. He even talks about enlisting, though he wouldn't have to go since he's married. Julia thinks he's more useful in Congress."

"He'll have to decide that for himself."

"She adores him. It is such a lucky, happy marriage."

"I know one that's happier," said Jerome.

"Yes," said Clare, "I've heard of that one."

"I wish we could have started twenty years ago," he said, gravely now, "it's pretty late for me. I know that. But I want time enough to make you happy. To love you in every way. Just a little time. I'd settle for even a year."

'We had eighteen years, thought Clare Tarrant. But that wasn't enough for either of us. She went to one of the windows and looked for pigeons on the broad sills outside. There were none. She turned away, trying to place herself in the present again. She must do something to quiet the memories, and to make her presence here real. Better telephone someone. Get in touch with her friends. Who should she call first? She knew hundreds of people in the city. Their names began to stream through her mind, their faces and occupations, their relations with her, the reason for knowing each of them. But none of the names stopped, beckoned, were surely welcoming. Who would want to see her or be glad that she was in New York?

To whom wouldn't a call turn into a chore or an intrusion? Naturally she should call Claude Gregory. She always did. And Jerome always called Philip Merton shortly after he arrived. He was Jerome's New York lawyer. Phil had written her a quite wonderful letter after she was widowed. Clare had thought, without making it a plan, that she would like to consult Philip about doing something for Julia and Belinda financially that would be tax-wise. It might be easier to talk to him about that than to the lawyers back home. And, as her daughter Julia came into her mind, Clare was reminded that when she was settled in she should give Belinda a ring, and at least let the child know she was in town. Without exacting or expecting anything.

"Mr. Merton, please," she said, having decided to call Phil first. "It's Mrs. Tarrant calling, Mrs. Jerome Tarrant from St. Ives."

He was quickly on the phone. "Well, Clare, how are you?"

"All right," she said, "I'm fine."

"How long have you been in town?"

"Just arrived this morning."

"Good—I certainly want to see you."

Not very much, she thought, hearing an undertone of caution—or did she imagine it? He's afraid he has an old widow on his hands, she said to herself.

"I hope you'll come around and have a drink with me one

day, Phil," she said, making it indefinite and narrowing it to his choice.

"I'd love to do that. Where are you staying?"

"At the Embassy. We always—it's comfortable, and central."

"I've thought so often about Jerome," said Philip Merton.

"Yes."

"It's a good way to go—I'm sure it's what he would have wanted—but it's hard on the ones who are left."

How many thousand times had that been said to her? There was no possible answer. It wasn't a good way to go. Jerome would have hated it. He liked to do things with dignity, with full preparation.

"How is everything going with you, Phil?" She swung the talk off Jerome.

"All right, except that I'm not getting any younger, unfortunately. We must have dinner together, Clare. How long will you be in New York?"

"I don't really know."

"It just happens that this particular week——"

"Please don't have me on your mind, Phil. I only called to say hello."

"I want to see you soon. Look, let me see how I'm fixed—my very stern secretary keeps me straight on engagements—let me ring you back today or tomorrow."

"When you get around to it, Phil. I'll be busy with this and that. It's good to hear your voice."

Clare remembered that when Jerome used to call Philip Merton an engagement had been made instantly. The demotion of being a widow, she thought. She did not call any more of the people who had been their mutual friends. After a moment's indecision she rang up Claude Gregory at the agency.

As usual, he was talking on another line. "I'll hang on," she said to the switchboard operator.

"Claude Gregory talking," he announced after a short wait, and the guarded voice almost made her smile.

"Clare Tarrant at this end," she said almost guiltily.

"No. Clare—actually you? Are you in town?"

"In the flesh. How are you anyway?"

"Stumbling along. When did you get here? Clare, I was terribly sorry——"

"I knew you would be—and thank you," she interrupted.

"Don't say anything more, Claude. It's true and talk seems to make it more true—worse. I'm a fugitive from pity. That's why I'm in New York actually."

"Can you lunch with me?"

Just like that, though he must be breaking a luncheon engagement with someone else.

"I'd love to. When and where?"

"One o'clock be all right with you? How about the old place on East 53rd?"

"My favourite. I'll be there."

She had now, as she left the telephone, a little foothold in the city. An engagement, a place to go where she would be expected. She thought of the famous little restaurant, the confidential busy bar always crowded with people who made a pet of the place. She could almost taste the first cool, assured Martini. Although it had been in the back of her mind to telephone Belinda, she decided to delay that. First she would unpack and change and then for an hour or two slip back into a world which might be credible without Jerome. Would it be? Once she had lived in it without him.

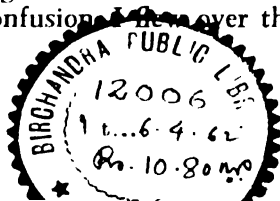
The ringing of the telephone surprised her. Was Philip Merton calling back so soon? No one else knew that she was here. Or had Claude found that he couldn't break his luncheon date with someone else.

"Hello——"

"Hello, Clare," answered the rich, confident voice of her daughter.

"Why, Julia darling—how nice of you to call me—how's everything over in Washington?"

"In its usual state of confusion. I flew over this morning. I'm downstairs."



"Downstairs here!"

"Yes, I have to make a talk at the Waldorf at a woman's luncheon—a political thing. I wasn't sure you'd be in New York—you were so vague about your dates—but I was passing the hotel and knew you usually stopped here. So I inquired and they said you'd just checked in an hour ago. Shall I come up?"

"I should hope so! And be quick about it! This is too wonderful."

Of course it was. Clare did not wish for a split second that her daughter were not on her way upstairs. In spite of that trace of apprehension, which Julia could bring with her. Her glance about the room was involuntary as was her quick, critical look in the nearest mirror. Then she went swiftly down the corridor to meet Julia and the affection in their embrace was real.

For an instant they appraised each other, looking for changes, new clothes, present state of health and mood. Julia is wearing her career beautifully this morning. She is not quite so slim as she was ten months ago, thought Clare. All that discussion and argument and trying to be on the right side shows a little in her face. But she is very good-looking.

Julia was handsome in a tall, clean way. Her blonde suppleness was suggestive of college athletics, not of beauty contests. Jerome used to say that Julia was the only girl he knew who would be able to go into a hotel without baggage in the middle of the night and excite no suspicion or insult. She loosened her coat and Clare took it from her with eager hospitality. It was old habit with Clare to try to make Julia sure that her mother had been longing to see her during any period of separation.

"You're looking awfully well," said Clare almost on a note of applause for the woman in politics.

"So are you," said Julia, "but don't get any thinner."

"I know. I'm a wrinkled hag as it is."

"You're simply wonderful," said Julia. "I don't know how you do it."

It wasn't quite a compliment for the accent fell on Clare's age. Clare laughed aloud. Julia always could deal a blow with the truth.

"No, I mean it," protested Julia and looked around at the expanse of sitting-room. "They certainly do you well here. Isn't this the same apartment——"

"I suppose they are crowded to the roof so they put me here," said Clare. "Of course I don't need all this space——"

"There's no reason why you shouldn't have it if you want it," said Julia, "you can afford it."

"Why should I?" said Clare, not as a question.

Julia answered the tone rather than the words. "Don't think of it that way. The change will be good for you. Though I still think it might have been a grand idea for you to come to Washington and take an apartment there for a few months. It's such an exciting year—so many things are happening to the world——"

Clare said, "It was dear of you to suggest it." But she knew why she had ruled out Washington as her refuge. There she would be Julia's mother, watching her prowess from a seat in the House gallery, attending her at cocktail parties, being introduced to distinguished people by a somewhat fabulous daughter. It was not vanity or jealousy that made her reluctant. She was very proud of Julia. Who else had she worked for all those years before Jerome? But Clare had felt the falsity and the chance of failure in taking on the role of Julia's widowed mother who needed companionship. She wasn't sure that she could fill the part or put it over, even to Julia. She didn't feel that she was quite the type.

"And maybe I'll take you up on it some day," she finished her thinking aloud.

"I do hope so," said Julia, "and I can't tell you how glad I am to have found you here this morning. I want to talk to you about something. You probably guessed what was on my mind when I was talking to you on the telephone two weeks ago. I wanted to write you but it is the sort of thing that it is almost impossible to put in a letter."

"Tell me," said Clare, though she knew at once that it was Belinda who couldn't be put in a letter. She wondered how long the conversation would take, what was the hour of Julia's luncheon, and whether she herself would have time to shower and change before going to lunch with Claude. As she had accepted his invitation, Clare had instantly decided to wear the gold knitted dress. Her black travel suit felt droopy and mournful. But she couldn't change while Julia was here. It would seem to be frivolous—for a widow of nearly sixty-five—to explain that she wanted to take a bath and change her shoes and jewellery, while Julia had a problem to put before her. She looked casually at her wrist. It was already nearly twelve o'clock.

"It's about Belinda," said Julia.

She paused as if choosing the right approach to her subject. Clare could not help visualizing Julia as she would appear to her audience today. She would be aware of admiration but she wouldn't make a thing of it. She would keep her mind on what she had to say, explain clearly, urge nobly. But the women at the luncheon would think first of how good-looking she was, and wonder if there was a man—poor, darling Julia, you should marry again. While you're still young enough. And the younger the better, for time with a man runs out fast.

"Belinda's drifting into trouble. I think she's at a crossroads in her life," said Julia.

Drifting. Crossroads. Such trite, political words, thought Clare. As she listened to her daughter, Clare could see Julia as she used to be in a Girl Scout uniform, always heading up the troop, and in the long succession of sweaters and skirts and projects and presidencies that she had worn in school and college. Even when, in orthodox bouffant dresses that too were something like uniforms, Julia had gone to dances, she made them projects rather than gay adventures or escapades. She never had a very good time with boys. I knew that, Clare was saying to herself, but what could I do? And her thoughts ran on to the few years when Julia had at last been a loved, rejoicing beauty, before the death of Paul Rood in the war

he had hated and embraced. She loved Julia now with the same fierce, futile pity that she used to feel when occasionally she had heard her unexhilarated step on the stairs coming home from a party.

"Drifting? I thought she had a job," said Clare. "Isn't she still with the magazine?"

"She has a miserable little research job," said Julia, "she verifies facts for articles—that sort of thing. There's no future in it."

"There could be if she likes it."

"She neither likes it nor dislikes it. She gets paid for doing it and she wants to be in New York and on her own. The money makes it possible."

"It may not be just what you wanted for her, Julia—I know you were disappointed when she had no flair for Washington life and wouldn't have a *débutante* party and all that—but if she wants to be independent, she'll be no less attractive and happy——"

"I didn't care about the social end," said Julia. "I hoped she would take advantage of what she could get in Washington, that's all I wanted—that she would begin to understand the world today and get a close-up of the people who are going to make or break it. I wasn't trying to tie her down to any clique. Surely you know that, don't you?"

"I know, Julia."

"She could do something worth while even in New York if she would let me arrange it. I could get her a very interesting job at the United Nations. I've helped other girls. But Belinda is so indifferent——"

"I love that old-fashioned name of hers," said Clare, trying to make a diversion.

"Her father chose her name," said Julia, "he wanted her to be old-fashioned. He used to say, 'Her braids must be tied with coloured string and her baby teeth must be planted.' It was a poem—there was more to it—and he said it expressed her. I forget the rest. But he adored the child—don't you see why I can't bear to have her turn out this way, and make

herself one more cheap, hard, sleeping-around girl—disappoint all his dreams! It's not just what it does to me——"

"But she won't turn out wrong! Julia, she's only twenty-two, she's feeling her way, testing her emotions. If she is playing around with some man you don't approve of, she may get burned but she has to learn about fire——"

"It's not playing. She's involved with a married man."

"Did Linda tell you this?"

"She didn't deny it," said Julia, "and she won't discuss it."

Clare's face was troubled now. She said, "I hope it isn't true. A love affair should be clear and untangled for her at this age, even if it's temporary. But feeling is never made to order, Julia. You have to take it as it comes and when it comes—if you want to live. Married, is he? Well, if it should be serious, there's such a thing as divorce."

"Not in this case. I don't think Henry Cowper could get a divorce. Even if he tried. It would be scandalous and cruel——"

"Nothing is more cruel than an unhappy marriage."

"The thing is," said Julia, with a reluctance that was unlike her, "his wife is sick. She's a mental case."

Clare did not move or question. After a minute Julia went on. Now, as if a bridge were safely crossed, she made her points more calmly, added it up for Clare, told the story.

"You see, this man lives in Chicago, in some suburb or other, but he has to be in New York quite often on business. He's been married for years—he's much too old for Belinda anyway. I should say he's between thirty-five and forty. He can be quite charming and I suppose it was quite a brilliant marriage—with her connections. But they had a stillborn child and his wife went into a state of melancholia. She had to have shock treatments and all that. It sometimes happens after childbirth, you know. From what I've been told, she came out of that and a year or so later they had another baby and it happened all over again. This time it left her definitely on the queer side. I don't know all the details but she has to have a nurse with her all the time."

"How did Belinda happen to know the man?"

"I'm responsible for that," said Julia unhappily, "that's another reason why I feel so dreadful about the whole thing. Of course I had no idea anything like this would develop. You see, Henry Cowper's wife is a niece of Senator Hume from Illinois. In fact he was her guardian. I know John Hume very well. We've worked together on several committees. He's outstanding. He was the one who brought Henry Cowper to my apartment. I was having people for cocktails. I knew Henry was married to a niece of the Senator's and I liked him—I thought the Cowpers would be good people for Linda to know. She picks up such strange characters, you know, she always has. So when he said he was often in New York I said, 'Look up my Linda sometime. I'd like her to meet you and your wife.' Something like that, perfectly natural and casual. I showed Henry Cowper her picture——"

"That must have fixed it," said Clare.

"But I forgot about him. Until several months later, Senator Hume asked me to lunch. He brought the conversation around to Henry Cowper and told me the story. At the time I didn't realize why John was telling me all that, or that he knew that Henry was seeing Belinda. Then I got a letter—unsigned—and it was very bitter about Belinda and Henry, and attacked me, saying that a depraved daughter was the result of a bad mother and why didn't I get out of public life. Of course you get those crazy letters occasionally and pay no attention—but it was what this one said about Belinda that horrified me. Then I remembered what the Senator had told me and began to put two and two together. So I called up Belinda and asked her to come over there, because I couldn't get away. I didn't tell her why but I said it was urgent and she came one Sunday, the next one. I was as tactful as I could be. I didn't accuse her of anything. But I did talk frankly about Henry Cowper and his wife and I asked Belinda to be careful not to be seen with him because he was in a bad spot and it could get nowhere."

"Was she disturbed—hurt?"

"I don't know. She escaped me—you know how Belinda is," said Julia in desperation. "I felt as if I were talking to the wind."

"She admitted that she was seeing him?"

"Oh yes—and her voice!—then she said it was time for her plane and she had to go."

"And she went."

"Yes, probably to meet him. I don't actually know that, but there was something about her face, a kind of anticipation that nothing I said seemed to affect. All she said was that there was nothing to worry about. Clare, will you please make her break off this affair!"

"I? If she won't listen to you?"

"I think she would listen to you. She's always thought you were wonderful. And you're the one person who could make her understand what she's letting herself in for because——"

She stopped as if she could not go on, even if she were not quite finished. It was not necessary. Clare knew the rest of it. She thought, Julia grew up with what I let myself in for. I never thought she was aware of it. She seemed so busy and she was so well taken care of.

Julia said, "Your being here in New York right now may make all the difference. I'm so happy about it!" She glanced at her watch and immediately was jerked back to her obligations. "I have to go—the people at the head table are supposed to meet in the Jade Room at twelve-thirty, and I have to fly back to Washington after lunch because the debate on the defence appropriation may end and there could be a vote tonight. Call Belinda right away, will you? Have you her number?"

"I'm sure I have. I can always reach her at the magazine."

"And Clare, I think it might be better if you don't tell her that I talked this over with you."

Julia drew on her immaculate gloves. The intensity of her feeling was under complete control now. She was a serene celebrity ready to go to the very centre of the head table.

Clare detained her after their kiss with one question.

"Wasn't there a boy called Peter in Belinda's picture? I thought he might be one of the reasons why she wanted to be in New York. When Jerome and I were here last time—that was more than a year ago—I remember that we took Belinda and this Peter to dinner and the theatre. He seemed quite mad about Belinda. I couldn't tell about her. Jerome rather liked him."

She remembered the dinner and the bright talk and the two beautiful young people and that Jerome had said when they got back to their hotel, smiling at her, "They don't know what it's all about yet, do they? But we do."

Julia said, "That would have been Peter Sulgrave. Columbia Law School?"

"I think so."

"He had to go into the service last year to do his time. She saw a lot of him. I'm sure he wanted to marry her but they weren't engaged. That may have been the trouble. She was at loose ends."

With one hand on the doorknob in the foyer she said, "Don't come to the elevator. I shall have to run down the corridor. And Clare, don't misunderstand what I said—for you everything worked out so wonderfully. But Belinda's so young—so casual about life—she's not like you."

"Not tough like me," said Clare. "Run along, Julia, and fix up the world."

Twelve-thirty now. Should she bother to change before lunch? What does it matter, Clare asked herself, walking around the living-room as if she were picking up pieces of the conversation that had been strewn around. I can't reach Belinda now anyway. She'll be out for lunch. But perhaps I should call her office, leave my name, and then it will be up to her. If she doesn't want to see me, it will be better just to leave a message that she can't ignore.

Once more Clare picked up the telephone. As she had expected, Belinda was not in the office. Clare began quickly to dress as she had intended. It was instinctive with her to

see a plan through, even if the interest and zest had gone out of it. But she was not thinking now of the lunch with Claude, nor looking forward to the smooth, cool Martini. She thought of the situation of that man called Henry Cowper.

CHAPTER TWO

HENRY COWPER was packing his two-suiter case and mentally reviewing the things that must be taken care of before he left for New York and the problems that had to be deferred. He had ordered more furnace oil and called the electrician to take care of the burned-out element in the kitchen range. The household equipment was always breaking down at some point because there was so little interested or responsible supervision. Servants were bound to be careless and to take advantage of the situation, thought Henry, when they knew that the woman who should be mistress of the house was incapable and helpless. But he did not like to say a critical word, for they might walk out on him if he did, and then where would he be?

For the moment everything seemed fairly well organized and should hold together until he came back again. Mrs. Merrill, the nurse in charge, was the most competent one who had been in Sylvia's case. He must remember to bring Mrs. Merrill some little present from New York. He would get her a bottle of French perfume when he was buying some for Sylvia, as he usually did, although it was a gamble now as to how his wife would receive a gift. She might turn her head away sullenly or burst into tears. There was only a chance that it might seem to please her for a moment. At least

Sylvia no longer asked why she couldn't travel with him any more. She had given up on that point. Or forgotten. Henry had been forced to put a stop to those trips more than two years ago and at first she had been wild with resentment. But no man could do his work or keep his mind on a business conference if he feared that his wife might be jumping out of a hotel window or walking into street traffic.

The nurse had a hard job. It isn't getting any easier, thought Henry. Sylvia refused to go for rides in the car now and that kept Mrs. Merrill also housebound. Sylvia would turn off a television programme in the middle of it or suddenly fling a vase of flowers across the room. Nobody knew what her next whim would be or what would come to the surface of that troubled, darkening mind. The irony—Henry Cowper was thinking about this once more—was that Sylvia had once so coveted luxuries that she could have for the asking now. She had become indifferent, confused even in her desires. Now, when the market for solid fuels was going to be unlimited, Henry's company was in on the ground floor of that industry, and money was no longer the problem that it had been in the first days of their marriage. Always Henry's problem, not Sylvia's. She had never tried to help him solve it.

: But with the generosity of his healthy mind, and with what pity was left after the long struggle, Henry reminded himself again that Sylvia had no capacity for love or for being a normal wife. If the roots of such things had ever existed in her, they must have rotted away in her early girlhood. He had memories of scenes with her which he had never discussed even with the medical men or psychiatrists who had taken care of Sylvia. They were too shameful and could add nothing to diagnosis. He could protect her that much.

To be fooled was a man's own fault. That was the way Henry Cowper looked at it. It meant a lack of good judgment and failure in observation. Henry blamed himself, not Sylvia, for their marriage. He had married Sylvia for her bright beauty, and because he was flattered that she wanted so immediately to marry him. He had accepted the fact that she

was Senator Hume's niece and ward as a kind of substantial, probably intellectual, background that he could trust. He had not taken time to know her well, but had gone along with her eagerness. It had seemed to Henry that her ardour was due to innocence and he was very careful not to allow it to carry him beyond bounds before they were married.

How she had fooled him ! Henry knew within a few days as her husband that Sylvia must have been practising all the tricks and techniques of petting and necking for years. Her bedroom talk appalled him and horribly informed him. She could be insatiable without love. Physical pleasure for her demanded excesses and abnormality, and she had no intention of being trapped in childbearing. When Henry turned from her in anger or disgust she would make every effort to seduce him on her own terms and when he was most at her mercy.

Somehow the pregnancy happened. Sylvia was torn between two dreads. Abortion terrified her because a girl she knew well had died as the result of one. The slow distortion of her figure and the mess of childbirth seemed almost as horrible as death to her. She vented her frightened fury on Henry for long months, although she could seem like a Madonna in public. But at that time Henry had hope. He told himself that when it was over, when Sylvia had a child to love and her maternal instinct was awakened, she would grow up. She would be different. In those days, Henry tried very hard to love the Sylvia who might be.

Everything had gone wrong. The child was born prematurely and dead. For a long time Sylvia was hospitalized, morbid and unresponsive, in a state of melancholy that Henry could not understand. He knew it was based on false sorrow and yet the doctors told him it was a true illness. Finally Henry took home a wife who was still beautiful, and who wanted all the aspects of marriage that could be displayed, but none of its honest intimacies.

Henry worked harder, the solid core of interest in his work as well as the necessity for money keeping him steady. He did his best to keep Sylvia satisfied and diverted. It was necessary

to keep her use of drugs under control for they increased her instability. Now, in some confused moods she would blame Henry for her childlessness. The doctors advised him that a successful pregnancy might restore her balance and, desperately, Henry had conceded. The horror and failure were repeated and Sylvia's second collapse followed. Long consultations made much use of the word "disturbed" and avoided a definition of insanity. But the experts who studied Sylvia Cowper's condition told Henry that his wife was no longer able to live a normal life. She must be kept under constant care.

If she were kept quiet and as happy as possible until she reached the menopause—perhaps fifteen years more, figured Henry—Sylvia might be comparatively normal for the rest of her life. They didn't guarantee that of course. The doctors always warned him that in Sylvia's case any accurate prognosis was impossible.

These facts, past and present, were in his mind as he packed his bag for New York. Henry did not regard them emotionally or pity himself. He didn't always carry them with him and he would soon leave them behind. But he would have to come back to them. The facts would be waiting for him. They had marked his face with a seriousness that was almost austere. It was a very handsome face on a lean, disciplined body that had never been softened by dissipation nor taken much time for ease.

Henry slid back the door of his wardrobe and the choice of suits hanging before him changed the direction of his thought. Should he take one of the dark blues or the Oxford grey—which would look best? Which colour would she prefer? The grimness around his mouth disappeared. Now he looked younger, almost boyishly unsure of himself, a little foolish. He took a blue suit from the wardrobe, drew out another long drawer and inspected his neckties.

Someone was knocking softly on the bedroom door.

"Come in," said Henry, "who is it?"

It was the nurse, Mrs. Merrill, who stood there. She was

always attractive in her immaculate whiteness, which made the auburn curves of her hair and black-winged eyebrows more definite. She was in Henry's age bracket or older, perhaps an unadmitted forty. She had been married and divorced, as Henry knew. But there was nothing domestic or motherly about her face. From the day he had engaged her, Henry had liked her scientific attitude. He always trusted a scientific approach of people towards their jobs. What he didn't like about Mrs. Merrill was the feeling she sometimes gave him, that he was part of this case she was on and that she knew too much about what made men tick. For some reason—there was no sense in it but it was instinctive—he closed the door of the wardrobe and lowered the cover of the suit-case as he turned to her in question.

"I don't like to bother you, Mr. Cowper, just when you're leaving on a business trip and must have so many important things on your mind. But I felt I must speak to you."

"Is something wrong?"

"Not exactly wrong, I hope. In fact it may be for the best. I think you probably can find someone to replace me without any trouble."

"Replace you? But I don't want to replace you. We're getting along fine. You said the other day that you thought you saw a little improvement in Mrs. Cowper."

"She goes up and down, of course. Today it's rather different and that has to be expected. But as a matter of fact, Mr. Cowper, it's a very confining case and I've been on it now for nearly ten months. It's a difficult responsibility and not the kind that builds up any professional advancement. I had no intention of staying this long. I much prefer a surgical case."

"But we need you," he protested, "my wife is used to you. She relies on you more than you realize perhaps. And so do I."

He spoke with vehemence, frankly pleading. For this nurse was his protection as well as aid. He couldn't let her go.

He said, "I know it must be confining for you but we can get more relief for you. The thing is that I want you in charge to run the show."

She looked calmly unconvinced. Henry thought, maybe it's a matter of more money. He was paying her an executive's salary now and she had every comfort, even considerable luxury in this big house. She certainly couldn't do better for herself, he thought, if she were running around some hospital. Of course she knows she has more over a barrel. I've got to leave. And I can't leave Sylvia here with some strange nurse.

"Let's talk this over when I come back next week," he suggested.

"The problem is that they called me from the registry. To ask if I would be free to take a case next week——"

"Well, they can't have you," said Henry. "If there's any question of money——"

"We have our professional rates, Mr. Cowper. I'm not considering it from that angle."

"I know that. Of course. But I want you to know how much I appreciate what you are doing for us and to make it well worth your while. There's certainly going to be a bonus for you at the end of this month, Mrs. Merrill. And when I come back from New York I think you ought to find some good nurse to fill in while you take a little paid holiday. I only want to know that you're on the job while I'm away."

"Of course I'll do anything for Mrs. Cowper that I can do."

"Then stand by," said Henry. "You will, won't you?"

He made it a personal favour. He added his charm to the extra money and the vacation.

"Well," she conceded.

"Good girl," he said, "I'm very grateful." He felt somewhat exploited. She was doing all right for herself and this was probably mostly bluff. But no matter what it cost, she was competent and he could trust her to do her work.

"I'll be in to see Mrs. Cowper in a few minutes."

"I've given her a tranquillizer," said Mrs. Merrill, "she always gets so upset when she realizes you are going to be away."

This was the hardest part. For after he said good-bye to Sylvia, Henry knew that he would leave her completely. Not carrying any warmth of past love or hope with him, or a favourite picture of her in his billfold. That was the sadness and he felt it. She had given him nothing to keep. When he got away, he would make the separation mental and emotional as well as one of physical distance. He was on his way to other interests, to someone else. But he would not allow himself to think of that just yet. Not until he was out of this house. Get this over first.

Sylvia had put on soft flesh in these idle years and it blurred her outlines as did the quilted robe she was wearing. Though it was a pink robe, it was not cheerful. There was an electric fire glowing behind a high, especially constructed screen, and the room was full of invalid luxuries, a reclining chair, many cushions, tables with games and books and television and radio boxes. She was not using any diversion. Mrs. Merrill was doing a crossword puzzle and Sylvia was sitting there, looking not at the fire but at the wall beside it.

The nurse left the room as if this farewell between husband and wife were a normal and intimate scene which should not be intruded upon.

"Well, Sylvia," said Henry, "I have to be off. It looks like good flying weather but it's getting colder out. You're pretty cosy in here though."

"Are you coming back?" she asked dully.

"Why of course I'm coming back, silly girl."

"When?"

"About the end of next week. I have to be in New York for a directors' meeting and some conferences—we're buying some more land to extend our plant out here—and then I have to go to Washington to sew up a government contract, if all goes well, and then back to New York to report on it. I should be back Friday—unless something comes up that holds me until the next Monday. Be good. Mrs. Merrill is going to take good care of you."

"How long have I been sick?"

"Not too long. For a thing like this. And you're doing fine."

"She won't let me do anything I want to do," said Sylvia, "that Merrill."

"What do you want to do?"

"I ought to give a party," said Sylvia, "I owe everybody."

Her troubled, petulant voice sounded almost normal. He had so often heard her say that in the first years. Sylvia's social obligations were always whips, not pleasures. I must entertain this one or that one—and she would worry about the exact seating of six people at the dinner table.

"Look, dear," he said, "when you get well enough you can have lots of parties. But right now the doctor wants you to rest completely for a little while. And you want to do what he says."

Sylvia said, "Henry, I don't want her to know. But I think I'm pregnant."

"No. You're imagining that, Sylvia."

"I just haven't told you because I didn't want to worry you."

"There's nothing to it," he said, "you're all right."

"Don't go away. Don't go."

"I have to go, my dear. On business."

"You want to go. You hate me. So does that woman, Merrill."

"Oh Sylvia, please——"

"I know—I know——" He could hear the rising hysteria and she was sobbing as he went to the door and signalled the nurse.

"She's upset," he said pathetically.

"She'll be all right. It passes in no time. I've a little surprise for her—lemon ice-cream—she loves it."

Henry said under his breath to the nurse, "She has a fantastic idea that she is pregnant. She doesn't want you to know."

"Oh, she often tells me that," said Mrs. Merrill calmly. "Sometimes women with psychomatic disorders really feel the

symptoms, you know. It's what we call pseudocyesis—false pregnancy—I guess I'm getting a little technical. And it's brought on either by a very strong desire to be pregnant or a very great fear of it. With her it isn't lasting. I'd better go to her. I wouldn't prolong the talk with her right now, if you've said good-bye. Have a good trip, Mr. Cowper. Have a happy time. You certainly have it coming."

There was something in the way she said the last few sentences, a hint of insight and familiarity that rubbed Henry the wrong way. He said stiffly, "Well, you can always reach me through the office, Mrs. Merrill. I'll be in constant touch with my secretary," and went quickly downstairs and out to the waiting car which his houseman was warming up for the long drive to the airport.

The car sped along smoothly, away from shock, incoherence and hopelessness. Every mile of distance between Henry and his home, every minute separating him from his last conversation with his wife, made it a little less sickening.

The houseman said, "There's a sort of rattle under the hood. I'll take care of it while you're away, Mr. Cowper."

"Better have the cars lubricated too, Ben," said Henry. The feeling that essential things would be taken care of was reassuring. It was all in fair shape—there was plenty of oil—Ben would fix the cars—the electrician would be at the house in the morning—the nurse was staying on the job and the morale of the rest of the household crew seemed to be pretty good. For a week or ten days he didn't have to wrestle with the problems at home. He couldn't change them but he was doing the best he could under the circumstances and, thank God, he didn't have to worry about the expense.

Imagine being in a pocket like this and not being able to pay for professional care, he said to himself. There must be a lot of men up against that. His abstract pity for them made him feel lucky and able. Steadily his spirits rose. He was no longer a husband trapped in a deteriorating situation, subject to a kind of blackmail by the people who worked for him. He was his own man, taking off now to do an important job,

and past success was pushing him forward. The variety of the city's life and work seemed to spread his own problem thin against it. This he felt rather than consciously thought, as they drove through streets lined with shabby little houses which were closed as tightly as could be against the winter cold and yet looked inadequate for comfort. Past the spaces in which warehouses and factories reared up among the coloured ranks of workers' cars.

Henry never tired of observing what industry was up to. He had a deep, informed admiration for its achievements. He was aware of the cost of a field that had become a manufacturing base, of the great gamble back of a product that now boasted on a huge billboard. As the car rolled up to the platform outside the ticket office of Eastern Airlines, he was already in the swing of his kind of enterprise.

"Good-bye, Ben. Keep an eye on everything at the house," he said, shaking hands.

"I sure will. And I hope you have a fine trip, Mr. Cowper."

Henry thanked him and meant it, for this send-off from Ben had no overtones. He liked stepping into the moving crowd at the ticket counter, buying his newspaper and extra cigarettes and waiting for the announcement of the flight that would make departure certain.

Now, finally, in the air, he felt free from dreariness. There was nothing more he could do at the moment about what he was leaving behind at home, and he let worry about that problem parachute to earth. As the plane gained its cruising speed he was already mentally figuring how long it would be before the use of solid fuel would be common in passenger planes, how soon most of them would be jets. He thought of the inevitable expansion for the products of his company. And there were new products coming along, being tested. That little laboratory which had started on a shoestring was paying off. It meant competition all right. That was one of the things they all must face up to at the New York meeting. They must move right along. Henry glanced at the news relating it here and there to his own problems and oppor-

tunities. The armed services certainly couldn't afford any lag, not at this time, and that meant good business. Also it meant a lot of red tape and higher taxes. But Henry's thoughts passed from profits and difficulties to linger on what was being done in the laboratories and plans. He was on the inside of a good many things and was aware of the necessity as well as the cost of experiments. As one came into his mind that was especially exciting he thought, I'll talk about that to Belinda. The plane droned on and he began to admit her to his mind.

It was often like that now. Thinking about her was a reward which he would not allow himself to have until other things were taken care of. She was kept apart from any tangle or mess. But in a few hours now he would see her, face her across a table, drive with her, laugh with her. She would carve out a piece of happiness and give it to him and it would keep him alive until he saw her again.

How many times had there been? Henry looked back at them. These were the mental pictures that Henry always carried with him now. He had no tangible ones. But he would never have sought out Belinda Rood unless he had happened to see an actual picture of her.

Senator Hume had said, "All work and no play makes a dull boy, Henry," and insisted on bringing a reluctant Henry to a cocktail party in Mrs. Rood's Washington apartment.

"She's a charming woman," said the Senator, "brilliant. Very hospitable too. She'll be delighted to have you come."

Mrs. Rood bore out that expectation. She even found time to talk to Henry and ask him about himself. He told her that he lived in Chicago but was often in New York on business.

"That's where my child is now," she said, "my daughter's in New York."

"In school?" asked Henry politely. Mrs. Rood seemed quite young as well as handsome.

"Oh no. Belinda has a job. She's all through school." As if to illustrate the point she picked up a framed picture on a table near her and said pleasantly, "This is my recalcitrant

girl. She really ought to be living with me here. But she seems to think New York is more exciting."

She handed the picture to him. Henry glanced at it, courteously bored, and was surprised. Mrs. Rood's words had given him the image of a determined, defiant career girl. The picture made a quite different impression. It was an enlarged colour print of a girl wearing a yellow sweater and blue shorts. There was a range of mountains in the background and a red-flowered tree beside the girl. Her casual clothes showed how beautifully her body was made.

"Surely this wasn't taken in New York," he said.

"No, someone took it last spring when Belinda was on vacation in Carolina," said Julia Rood, "I liked it and had it blown up. It's quite good of her."

The girl wasn't in the least like her confident mother. She looked shy—no, not exactly shy. But not at all aggressive. Simple—I don't mean simple. I mean natural, Henry said to himself.

"Very attractive picture." He gave it back to her mother.

"It would be nice of you to look up Belinda some time when you are in New York," said Mrs. Rood. "She's in the telephone book and I know she would love it if you gave her a ring. I'd like to have her meet you and your wife—I'm so fond of Senator Hume—and I do hope that Mrs. Cowper will be with you when you come to Washington next time—will you excuse me——"

She moved swiftly to untangle a knot of guests but Henry would not have explained about Sylvia anyway. Not in the clatter of a cocktail party. He made no habit of talking of his wife's illness. He did not want casual sympathy. She was ill. That was all Henry said when it was necessary to say anything about it. Yes, he hoped too that she would be better soon.

Senator Hume beckoned him and Henry moved away from the table where the picture stood. But later on he found himself standing by it again, taking another look at the likeness of Belinda Rood. For coloured prints were not often as good

as this one. The composition was extremely interesting. He thought, of course she might look like that and be a phony. Some man is going to be lucky. Probably some man is lucky already.

He had no intention at the time of ever telephoning Belinda Rood. But he didn't quite forget her existence. It was a month later, when again in New York with a long evening stretching emptily ahead, that he looked up her name in the telephone book. Just for curiosity. There was only one Belinda Rood so it must be the same girl. She lived over by the East River. Henry decided that he wouldn't follow it up. She'd think he had a nerve—a married man, so much older than she must be. She'd get the wrong idea. Still, New York girls were often glad to get a free dinner. If she turned him down, he had nothing to lose. Of course he would make it clear that he was calling at her mother's suggestion.

Henry was going back to what was technically his home the next afternoon after a final conference. He had been working without let-up for several days and this was the one free evening he would have on this trip. He knew that he could find a girl easily enough and drink himself into desire, or what passed for it. During Sylvia's long incapacity he had found women sometimes or let them find him. But such release gave him only a brief, almost angry satisfaction which could turn into contempt after a few hours. Tonight he was sure of that ahead of time. He didn't want to go out on the town.

He dialled the number listed for Belinda Rood. He told her later that it was pure luck that he did.

"Not luck," said Belinda, "you had to call me."

"Why?"

"Because I was waiting for you to call."

"But you didn't know I existed. You didn't even know my name."

"I didn't know your name. But I knew you existed," said Belinda.

"Are you a little fey?" he asked, teasing her.

"Sometimes," said Belinda.

He had come to believe it.

That was their first meeting. Henry took her to Voisin's that night. She said that she was free for dinner and he wanted to do it right so he suggested that expensive place. Belinda said not to call for her because she had an errand in that neighbourhood and promised to be at the restaurant at eight o'clock.

"I'll wear a blue dress," she said, "and anyway you say you saw my picture so you know what I look like."

It was August and the day had been a sweltering one. Henry wondered what he had let himself in for. As he waited in the cocktail room, his impulse cooled off. It began to seem preposterous. The picture he had seen probably didn't look in the least like her. He was a dope. She would turn out to be a typical, dreary career girl, who couldn't get along with her family. Just before eight a young woman arrived by herself. She was wearing a tight blue lace suit and Henry's spirits sank lower. Was he going to be stuck with that brassy blonde? To his relief another man rose to greet the girl.

Then in came—unmistakably—Belinda. Henry was on his feet in the same instant. He recognized her at once. He felt as if he had known her before. She was his picture. There was the naturalness he had felt, the forthright, happy look that he hadn't been able to forget. There was anticipation in her face and, wonderfully, it was there because she was meeting him. She did wear a sea-blue dress, made of some very thin stuff. It was buttoned to the neck and she looked very cool as she came in out of the heat. Belinda said she liked the dress too, that it had cost only twelve seventy-five at Macy's. She told Henry that later on in the evening when he said it was a very beautiful dress.

Henry had not known he could enjoy an evening so much. Or that the company of any girl could be both exhilarating and peaceful. He dropped his guard. He wasn't afraid to talk to her. He thought now, Belinda made it possible from the start. She made it so right. She was so unaffected, with no

pretending, no double talk about having to know me better.

When he had called her on his next trip to New York, he was again uncertain. He did not believe that an evening like that first one could possibly be duplicated. There was bound to be a let-down and disappointment. Henry was afraid that Belinda Rood wouldn't like him when she saw him the second time. Now she would see clearly that he was a man of thirty-six and of course he had told her in their first talk that he was married. He explained that his wife was invalided with a serious nervous breakdown, and Belinda did not question him about the cause nor ask for more details than he gave her. Nor did she offer him pity.

Before that second meeting, Henry had argued with himself that he should let well enough alone. He'd had a pleasant break, a very delightful evening with Belinda Rood, but friendship or continued association with such a girl was not in the cards for him. Of course he did not let it alone. He had called Belinda as soon as he reached the New York airport.

He did not try to resist seeing her after that, not after she told him how much she had hoped that he would come again to New York. There was no attempt at provocation in what she said but neither did she try to deny the miracle of what was happening between them. There had been a week in October when conferences had kept Henry in New York, and they had seen each other every day.

She made the city different for him, filled it with new amusements and interests and experiences. They went to baseball games together. They saw new plays and spent hours after the theatre discussing them, disagreeing or agreeing as no two people had ever agreed before. They dined in famous restaurants but Belinda would cook a meal in her own apartment if that idea seemed better. They experimented, going to places they heard about, as on the night when they went to the coffee shop where the idols of the Beat Generation were said to congregate. Henry would not stay there long.

They were interested in each other's taste. They shopped for a new hat for Henry one day and she found him stubborn. Belinda coveted a celestial globe for her rooms and they went to an auction where one was to be sold but her bid failed to buy it.

Henry found another celestial globe for her.

"I can't take this, Henry. I know what it must have cost."

"It's for Christmas."

"Christmas is over."

"It's for Easter then."

She ran her hand over the old yellowed globe with its pattern of stars.

"It's our personal heaven," said Belinda, "I do thank you, Henry."

Their relationship was being woven of laughter and gravity, of his work and her job, of what they mutually liked or could get along without, of the last meeting and the next one, of telephone calls. Henry had put a private telephone in his Chicago office so that he could talk to her without having the call go through the switchboard at the plant. Sometimes he had to make sure that she was still there, that nothing had happened to her, that no one had robbed him of her. He had panics now and then, fearing that this love which he could not safely anchor might be caught in some dangerous current.

They had been seen together. Henry knew that. One of the Chicago salesmen in his own company, a man he didn't like, had made him uncomfortable in a New York restaurant one night. The fellow kept staring at Belinda, though Henry ignored him after a nod of recognition. There was no reason why Henry should not take a girl out to dinner, but this man knew about the Cowper domestic situation and he was the type who might try to make a salacious story of the incident.

Once in January, when he had called on Senator Hume in Washington to discuss an army contract, Henry had felt that

the atmosphere was slightly strained. The Senator had asked about Sylvia's condition—that was only natural—and gone on to inquire whether Henry had ever called on Mrs. Rood. The question did not seem casual and Henry felt at the time that there was motive behind it. He said that he had not seen Mrs. Rood since the cocktail party. The Senator had raised his untidy eyebrows, then frowned, as if he had something on his mind. But he did not follow up the matter. Henry had changed the subject but come away with a very uncomfortable feeling. He suspected that there must be gossip about Belinda and himself. If it had come to the ears of Senator Hume, it must be widespread.

He knew what would be taken for granted, if such rumours were persistent. But the obvious conclusion was not true. Henry was still trying to protect Belinda with that fact. He loved her. He had told her so many times. He had never loved a woman before. He knew that now. But she was not his mistress. They had not slept together. He hated the lingo of liaison that would attach to them if gossip took over. Their feeling could not be described.

Not yet, in spite of desire and opportunity. They had talked about it of course. It was his decision but Belinda who made it possible for him to keep it. They were so happy anyway, happier than Henry had ever been in a sex relationship. He would not admit to himself that he was afraid of what that might do to this clean, free love, that he dreaded some hideous similarity or reminder.

But he loved the texture of her skin, the simplicity with which her hand clung to his in the dark of a theatre, the pressure of their bodies in an embrace of good-bye or reunion. He had never desired a woman as he did Belinda. He firmed resolves but each time that he was on his way to see her he would think, "Will it be this time?"

He was thinking that as the plane began to dip, thinking realistically that nobody would credit the situation. He thought, is it fair to her? That is all that counts. What is best for her?

At Idlewild, in the early dusk he dialled her number. When he heard her voice, he felt complete and safe.

"I'm here, Belinda."

"Was it a good flight? "

"Of course. I was coming in the right direction. Do you love me? Tell me quickly."

"Yes. You'll be surprised. It's grown since you've seen me."

"You darling girl. I'm afraid it may take me about an hour and a half. I'll grab the first taxi in sight, and as soon as I leave my bag at the hotel and get cleaned up I'll come over to your place. Where would you like to go for dinner? "

"I must tell you about dinner tonight——"

"What's happened? "

"Ah, nothing to make you sound so alarmed. It's only that Clare is in New York. I knew she might be coming but I didn't know when. I found a message at the office and when I called her back a little while ago she suggested dinner with her."

"Who's Clare? "

"Clare Tarrant. My grandmother. I always call her by her first name."

"Oh," said Henry. "Well——" He faced up to disappointment. "Must you really see her tonight? "

"I want to. She's alone—her husband died not so long ago. It must be dreadful for her to be here without him. She's probably running into memories everywhere."

"I'll tell you what—let me take you both to dinner. I don't suppose," he added hopefully, "that your grandmother will want to stay out very late, will she? "

There was a sound of laughter. To hear her gaiety again was so good--no one was so gay!

"What's so funny? " he asked.

"The way you said 'your grandmother'. Clare's not like that—she doesn't fit that tone of voice, Henry. I told her that I expected you would be here and she said to bring you along. She's at the Embassy. I could meet you there, or, if you'd rather, you can pick me up and we'll go over together."

"She won't want me tagging along?"

"But she does."

"Does she understand? I mean, Belinda—won't she think it's out of line?"

"Because you're married? I told her you were. She wants to meet you. You'll like Clare."

CHAPTER THREE

THE Dieppe Restaurant, where Clare had met Claude Gregory for lunch earlier that day, was like most of its kind, with a narrow entrance set several steps down from the sidewalk. The place always reminded Clare of speakeasy days and the cards of admission that admitted almost everybody. I helped to wear these steps smooth, she said to herself. She was ten minutes late but she hardly expected that Claude would be on time either. At the office some client was always detaining him with insistence or resentment or perhaps a good idea, and clients were hard to shake off unless they were taken out to lunch.

Today, however, he was already at the bar which was a prelude to the restaurant. He faced the outer door watching for her as he talked to some taller man. Claude Gregory was small and so sallow that he looked as if he might be made of leather instead of flesh. He had grown bald and wore big glasses, with lenses that had steadily thickened over the years from reading countless manuscripts. How, with no aid at all from nature, he managed to give the impression of both wisdom and kindness, was a mystery.

"Clare," he said with affection, and he kissed her hand as if it were a natural American custom, "how good to see you, my dear."

"Clare," said the other man also and she looked away from

Claude and saw that his companion was Lee Havighurst. He looked much older than when she had seen him last but his face had the same carefully cultivated accents, the little beard that brought it to a neat point, the blue eyes set under shelves of brow, watching for the next thing to mock. He smiled with the familiar open and shut smile that didn't last and didn't warm, and told her that she was looking beautiful.

"I'm reincarnated anyway," said Clare, "this must be

"I wish to God it were," said Lee, "those were better days. Before the rot set in."

"There were soft spots then," said Claude.

Havighurst was still looking Clare over. She thought, he knows what it costs.

He said, "Let me buy you both a drink. At least the liquor is better than it was in 1930."

"We can't," said Claude, "thanks, Lee, but Theodore is holding a table for us. I'll be seeing you."

"Are you in town for long, Clare?" asked Havighurst.

She said she didn't know and quickly answered his next question as to where she was staying. It was obvious that Claude was trying to shake off Lee. The table which Theodore had reserved was one of the best and could accommodate only two.

"It's still a Martini?" asked Claude, drawing the table closer to them.

"Yes, please, still faithful. I'm sorry I'm late. But after our talk my daughter surprised me. You know—Julia—she came over from Washington for a few hours. Some meeting."

"Your daughter seems to be often in the headlines these days."

"Isn't it amazing? She seems made for politics. And she went to Congress first like a human sacrifice—to fill out the term of poor Paul Rood after he went to war and was killed. She's been there ever since. She's getting so important that she terrifies me."

"She always did terrify you," said Claude with a grin.

"You think so?"

"You were always rushing back from here to see her—afraid she wouldn't like it if you didn't hear her speak her piece or something. In the early days——"

"I practically commuted between here and St. Ives for years. Well, I had to. That was the best place for Julia and the agency was getting on its feet. Do you remember how that first Havighurst best-seller went over without warning and we began to make money?"

"Lee doesn't forget that either."

"He looks much older."

"He has plenty of reason to show wear."

"Were you trying to get rid of him just now?"

"It's a problem," said Claude. "I didn't see any reason why he should dump his troubles and resentments on you. If I'd let him join us, that would have been it. You know how Lee is. When he was making big money he thought he didn't need an agent."

"That was after I was out of the business. I remember he was beginning to be difficult."

"Well, he decided I was superfluous. He hired a couple of secretaries and handled things for himself with mighty gestures. Now that he's on the skids, he wants me to build up a new public for him. It just can't be done."

"Doesn't his work still sell?"

"No. How long since you've read anything he wrote?"

"Not in the last few years certainly. I thought he was writing less. If I thought about it at all."

"He can't find a publisher for his newest novel," said Claude. "Of course he played the field with publishers. He never was loyal to any one of them."

"But he is brilliant."

"Was," said Claude. "I'll bet your daughter doesn't read him."

"Julia wouldn't. She only reads non-fiction. But Belinda—she's Julia's child—no, I suppose she wouldn't be interested. It's a different world."

"That's it. And Lee's not in touch with it."

"He had children of his own," said Clare, "can't he learn from them?"

"His wives always took the children when they left. Lee never wanted them. Of course he doesn't believe he's out of contact with what people think and want. But Lee's books seem a lot of fuss over nothing today. People don't talk so much. The emotional approach has changed."

"But emotions don't change."

"Of course not. I wouldn't be surprised if we're due for a romantic period," said Claude.

"Over-due," she said, "everything has become so harsh. The lover with the switchblade knife."

"That's about it. You're as keen as ever, my dear. And personally very reassuring. I was afraid that grief might have got you down—but you look just as good as new."

"What pretty talk——"

"Of course your skin always did fit over your bones almost perfectly. There was nothing that could sag."

"I sag plenty—especially inside." She smiled at the waiter and said, "I'll have another cocktail just as dry as this one, and then the mushroom omelette and coffee, please."

After Claude had said he'd go along with that, she asked him more about the business. He said it was doing very well, that they had some promising young clients who were building up a public for themselves.

"Mary's still there of course?"

"Yes, but she's working at home a good deal now. She's not well. But just as able mentally as ever."

"Poor Mary, she was always in love with Lee. She should have married him, if only for the ride."

"That's all it would have been. He's divorced again, you know."

"He must be paying off half the female sex by this time."

Claude said, "You can't get alimony out of rejection slips. You look as if you are well-fixed, Clare. Or is that costume stuff?"

"No," she said, looking down at the diamonds in her bracelet, "that's generosity. I'm all right, as far as money goes. A good deal of Jerome's income died with him—that couldn't be helped. But there's still plenty of money if I can control my extravagances and not live in the style he accustomed me to. I want to help Julia somehow—she has only her salary and Washington is expensive. And this child of hers will have nothing except what she gets from me when I die, unless she should happen to marry money. Belinda would never do that deliberately. You know what, Claude? I found myself wishing the other day that I was the way I used to be and had to worry about money every minute."

"You never gave it all your time," he said. "I should think it might be very agreeable to live the life of a wealthy widow."

"I don't like rich widows," said Clare. "Most widows are a gruesome, expendable lot. A poor one, clutching her shawl about her, is at least pitiable and a little dramatic. But the ones who are well provided for—I tell you they are really stripped down, they're stripped of every worry and fear, stripped of incentive, all the things that make life alive. They're just survivors—with nothing to survive for usually, and all they're good for is to keep each other warm. They tinkle a little. They go on cruises—in midwinter the decks of all the luxury ships are lined with widows in steamer chairs, going around the seven seas, going around the world, actually going nowhere——"

"You should write it up," Claude told her with his sympathetic grin, "write a piece about widows."

"I'm not a writer," said Clare, "I'm a widow."

"You don't seem to run true to type."

"Oh, I'm not so different from most of them. That's why I often horrify myself. That's why I came here instead of sailing on the Mediterranean with my natural pals. But at least I don't fool myself. And I don't say the way so many widows do, 'If my dear husband had lived, he would never have been himself again, so I'm glad he is at peace.' They won't even

suffer—I wouldn't care what shape Jerome was in, if he were just there."

She was silent and he let it alone. When it was time he asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I have to learn how to live alone. That's the first job. Of course I lived alone for years before I married Jerome, but it was different then. There were so many possibilities."

"There still are."

"Hardly any."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm nearly sixty-five."

"Most of the great statesmen of the world are older."

"I'm no statesman. That might be all right for Julia. I suppose she will be lucky that way if she doesn't ever marry again."

"You could marry again."

"Incredible," she said with distaste and changed the subject. "You don't change much, Claude. How old are you? I always forget."

"Fifty-eight."

"I won't believe it. To me you're the young man that Tony used to put all the work on that he took the credit for."

"Tony looked like the credit," said Claude with the soft chuckle that she remembered well, "I never did. And Tony did have the temperament of a pirate."

"For me he's almost faded out. I can't remember the actuality of being married to him. Of course there's Julia to prove it. But Jerome washed out Tony, and a whole lot of other things too. When Jerome took me over, he did it completely."

"I remember that I wondered, just at first, if it would last with you two."

"A lot of people did. There were those who hoped with all their hearts that it wouldn't last."

"You filled his eye certainly. But I wasn't sure that you could fit into a conventional life—you were used to a lot of excitement."

"I had more than ever after I married Jerome," said Clare. "He looked conventional but he was an adventurer at heart. When he was a young electrical engineer, you know, the people he worked for sent him all over the world on jobs. He absorbed every place where he had been. He wasn't just St. Ives. He was part of Brazil, part of Rhodesia."

"I didn't realize that about him."

"You had to live with him to know it. He was quite a gambler too. I found that out when I went through his safety deposit boxes. He'd always take care of every obligation but he loved a flyer. There were so many ducks and drakes in those boxes, ventures in Africa, and in Mexico, that had petered out. But he'd had fun with them, I'm sure. Jerome was worldly in the real sense of the word. I was the provincial from New York."

He looked amused and doubtful and Clare said, "Yes. If we were in Greece, Jerome would tell me about ancient civilizations. He had a lot of knowledge tucked away in his mind and some of it was pretty racy stuff. Or if we were coming into Chicago on the train he would explain what goes on in a blast furnace. He was interesting. He made me interested in something besides myself, which was a colossal job for any man to undertake. And nobody knew except me how sensitive he was and how emotional—why do you suppose I married him?"

"I never thought it was for security," said Claude.

"No. Though being taken care of was good too. I was tired of looking out for myself. An unmarried, fairly young woman in New York has to work overtime doing that." She paused, reminded of Belinda, and said, "But girls still run away from their comforts and protection and come to New York. Is it easier for them to take care of themselves here than it used to be?"

"I think that maybe they take it more easily. They don't expect so much. And they don't pretend that they want to be independent. They've called their own bluff on that. Girls seem more feminine—it's been a gradual tendency but

it's noticeable. That's why I think we may go into a romantic cycle."

"I wasn't feminine?"

"Oh yes, you were. Oddly enough. Even when you were in business and working with me, you always made them conscious of the basic relationship."

Clare laughed and she thought, Jerome used to tell me the same thing.

She said, "My granddaughter, Belinda Rood, is working here. Julia wanted her to stay in Washington but she came over and found herself a little research job on a magazine."

"They all want jobs. Even when they don't need the money, a job gives a girl status, something to tie to. You know what I mean."

"I do indeed. Never more than now."

"As to that," said Claude, "I was thinking when you were going on with your tirade about widows that you might want to get back in the agency. Frankly, before I saw you today I thought you might have that idea and I was of two minds about it. I've only one now. You could be very useful."

"I had no such idea. I just wanted to see you."

"But there it is," he said. "As I told you, Mary is really a pretty sick woman. Sooner or later she's going to have to give up. I have a couple of people in mind who may grow up to her job eventually but they aren't ready for it now. You could step right in."

"Why, Claude, I haven't done any work like that for eighteen years!"

"I don't believe it would take very long for you to get your hand in again."

She shook her head. "I've been living so differently that I'm completely out of touch. I wouldn't be any good."

"Well, it was just an idea. It might be worth a try, if you don't like being footloose. No obligation either way if it didn't work out. I wouldn't want to urge hard work on someone who can take her ease. Let it go for now anyway."

"Yes, please let it go. I'm certainly flattered and grateful

too that you'd even consider such a possibility. But I'm afraid to commit myself to anything just yet. I'm confused about myself. And to try to pick up where I left off so long ago—no——”

“If you should feel like it, kick the idea around a little, that's all,” said Claude. “You'll be seeing Mary?”

“Very soon, I hope.”

“Then you'll get the whole picture. There's nothing in the least urgent or immediate. Unless you'd be happy with it——”

That old word, happy, Clare said to herself. Claude always used it in that reassuring and yet provocative way. He would say to an editor, “I don't want you to buy it unless you're happy with it,” and to a writer, “Unless you're happy about the suggestions for revision, don't take them.” He could be very convincing about pointing the way to happiness. As he went on talking about other things and people she felt the warmth of sharing likes and dislikes as she had not felt it in many months, not since Jerome had died. They lingered over coffee but she was sure that his afternoon must be even more crowded than usual because he had taken time for this unexpected luncheon with her. Before three o'clock she said good-bye. Claude went off with gallant reluctance which Clare knew covered the necessity to get back to work.

She had said that she did not want to go back to the agency business, and he had seemed to relinquish the idea. Clare did not want to think of it. But she could not help herself. As she went her way up Park Avenue—her only errand now was to buy flowers for her apartment and it seemed a rather ridiculous one—she found that she was thinking of the girl Claude obviously remembered, the self she had forgotten because it was better if she did. Claude had known her before she had been in New York for a year. He was working for Tony Delchamp; when Tony hired her too. This afternoon, as she tried to get out of the path of one memory, another mowed her down.

CHAPTER FOUR

I N the spring of 1914 skirts were long and worn over petticoats. At Vassar College the girls dressed formally for dinner twice a week. Clare Joyce was there on a scholarship grant and could spend very little money for clothes, but a seamstress in her home city of St. Ives, who worked for two dollars a day, had made her a sapphire blue marquisette dress with floating panels, and a pale green China silk one with a short train. The dresses varied the colour of her eyes. Tonight, on the evening of Class Day, she was wearing the blue one. Her uncurled, almost golden hair was twisted into a Psyche knot at the back of her neck. She was slim and supple, a girl kindled with energy and imagination. Her beauty had been acknowledged two years before when she had been chosen to be one of the girls to carry the Daisy Chain. Clare had earned greater honours since then. For the last year she had been editor-in-chief of the college magazine. She was to make a Commencement speech in the chapel tomorrow.

Clare had become a student power, a celebrity in that curious, exclusive world-to-itself of the campus. The social unimportance of her family, the shabbiness of the living-room chairs and the condition of the peeling tin bath tub at home did not hinder her. She never denied those things, never pretended that they did not exist. But for the last four years, even

during vacations in St. Ives, she had been able to ignore everything but her own charm and ability. For during that time the college had been her base and her personal career there absorbing to her and remarkable to everyone else.

Only in the last weeks had she realized how completely it could dissolve around her. She had been so admired and sought after that she had assumed without vanity that plenty of opportunities would be waiting for her after her graduation. The blow came when the fellowship for which she had applied, one which would give a year's study in Europe, was awarded to another girl. Clare took the news gallantly but it had been a shock.

"Of course I'm very glad for her," Clare said to a member of the faculty whom she knew well enough to question frankly, "but I can't help wondering. Did the committee have some prejudice against me?"

"None at all," protested Dr. Buxton, "your name was very seriously considered, Clare. They spoke very highly of your qualities of leadership and of your executive ability. It was only that some members of the committee thought that perhaps you were a little immature."

"Immature?" repeated Clare, as if the word were insult. "What they felt was that you haven't quite found yourself," said the professor, making it worse, "that you haven't yet discovered your proper field."

Clare laughed to prove the statement ridiculous. She said, "Well, it may be just as well not to be tied down to a fellowship. It could be hampering. It will be better to go to New York."

"What are you planning to do there?"

"Why I intend to write, of course," said Clare, "to go on with what I want to do. Just at first I may try to get a job with a publishing firm. For the experience."

The difficulty in going to New York was that she had no money and no job in sight. But now she must go. For the alternative was to go back to St. Ives, live with her mother and her sister Elise in the old, ramshackle house and find a

way to earn her living in her home city. Perhaps she might be able to get a job on one of the newspapers, writing society notes and reporting club programmes. Or she might get a position as a teacher of English in the local High School and try to write a novel in her spare time. They were humiliating prospects after having been voted at her Class supper, "the most likely to succeed". Her friends expected success for her.

So did her mother and her sister. Her father was dead and they were all of Clare's immediate family. Neither of them was coming to the Commencement exercises. The cross-country trip was expensive and Mrs. Joyce was frail and dreaded any change of beds or climate. Elise had a job in a law office. If she asked for a vacation in June, she would be allowed none later in the summer. It was not fair to Elise, who was shy and did not enjoy meeting strangers, to urge her come and Clare had not done it. It doesn't matter, she wrote. There's nothing to it.

Elise and Clare's mother had written affectionately that they hoped she would be able to come home for a while. Clare knew they loved her and there was plenty of room for her in the old house. But she knew too that they didn't expect her to be content there, as they were. Her own ambition and brilliance had cut off that retreat. Clare felt that if she did go home to live she would let down the others in her family as well as herself. That was only a feeling but it created a compulsion. To admit to anyone that the thought of a plunge into New York frightened her was impossible. She had been secretly fighting fear of the unknown, selling her books and bits of furniture to get a little money, and trying to make a plan out of what was only determination. Then today, like a miracle, had come the letter which seemed to welcome her into a new world.

She was reading it again. She was in the office of the college magazine, sitting at the old table desk which she had used for the last two years and which now would belong to the new editor, when the girls came in. Jean Granger and Sally Compton and Libby Jacobs. They had been her associate

editors as well as her best friends. But during these last days, as their parents and relatives arrived for Commencement, and their family backgrounds grew more distinct, it seemed to Clare that they were no longer so intimate. Jean was going to Maine for the summer, and she would go with her parents in a chauffeur-driven limousine. The Yale man who was going to marry Sally was hovering around her. Even orphaned Libby had an aunt in the picture, who had once graduated from the college.

They were gay. They said they had been looking for Clare.

"We thought we'd find you here. The old scene of the crime!"

"Reading a love letter, Clare?"

"A letter I love," said Clare. "You remember that book review I sweated over on the Hauptman book, *The Fool In Christ*? That we printed in the May issue? Well, as usual, we sent a copy to the publishers. I didn't dream they'd pay any attention to it. But this morning I had a letter from Mr. Morel—he's the editor of the firm—and he writes that he would like to have me come in to see him sometime when I'm in New York. It's dated a couple of days ago—the mail has been piled up in the post office here—but I'll be in New York tomorrow!"

"But how marvellous! He may give you a job," exclaimed Jean.

"And they publish such a good magazine. Probably we'll be seeing your stories in *Centurion* before long!"

"Of course I don't know how it will work out," said Clare, her voice rejoicing, "but it's a chance to meet an important editor. And he asked for it."

Sally said. "Be sure to show him your *Cause of Death* story."

"You think I should?"

"Of course—didn't it practically start a civil war on this campus?"

Clare laughed. She said, "Well, what could the girl in that story do except commit suicide? The whole point was that the

girl wasn't to blame and that prostitution is the result of the economic system."

"College girls aren't supposed to think about prostitution."

"It would surprise a lot of people to know what we do think about," said Clare.

"Going to tell them that in your Commencement speech tomorrow?"

"I'd certainly like to," said Clare.

As she stood before the audience which filled the Chapel the next morning, the impulse to do it rose in her. She had been speaking for more than fifteen minutes. She sensed a kindly condescension in the people who were listening to her. She was sure that they were not taking what she said seriously. Half-way down the centre aisle someone's fat father was comfortably dozing, his chin burrowing into his collar. The carefully chosen words of her rehearsed speech seemed limp. The members of the faculty were in side pews and Clare saw the profile of one indifferent professor, the one, she suspected, who had thought her immature. This was her chance. She departed from her text. Her voice became more familiar, more urgent. Her manner changed from that of a student reciting a well-learned essay to that of a crusader pressing a conviction home to his hearers.

"The subject of my talk this morning is the obligation of college women to society," she said, "and please realize that some of us at least take that obligation very seriously. We have spent many hours in the last four years considering the jobs and duties and desires that are ahead of us and discussing them freely and fearlessly. We are not afraid of facing the truth. Some of us believe that we have an obligation to make sure that never again will one hundred and thirty-five girls, many of them as young as we are, leap to their death from a New York sweat shop. We think that we have an obligation to change an economic system which drives girls and women into lives of vice and shame. We believe that all the injustices in relations between the sexes should be abolished. Our contacts with life so far may have been limited but we are

aware of what is ahead. Our future experience may be painful. It may be tragic. But do not think that we are afraid. We are ready to take all human experience as it may come to us. Ladies and gentlemen, we may be young, and by some people we may be considered immature. But the eyes of immaturity are neither dim nor fearful!"

She swung back to the rest of her prepared speech, feeling a lift of triumph. The man who had been half asleep was fully awake now. The indifferent professor was regarding her with a frown. She had made them listen.

Congratulations, admiring glances and some critical ones followed Clare as she went through the crowd of graduates and their friends who were gathered outside the chapel a half-hour later. She met the Grangers.

"Such a sweet, earnest talk," said Jean's mother, "and you looked so pretty, my dear."

"Thank you," said Clare helplessly.

Mr. Granger said, "Jean tells me that you come from St. Ives. Beautiful city. I know the Governor quite well."

"Oh do you? I've never met him. I'm sorry—I have to hurry—haven't finished my packing."

"See you at lunch," Jean called after her. "It was a grand talk, especially when you *ad libbed*."

Sally and her young man stopped Clare, with more praise and jokes. Clare escaped them too. She said thank you, and good-bye again and again. She saw Professor Buxton crossing the green and she herself went the other way, taking a rear path to her dormitory. She didn't want to talk to anyone. Her few minutes of exhilaration had gone flat. What she had said made no difference to any of these smiling, proprietary people. A student in the hallway was nudging a parent, pointing out Clare. Clare saw that but it gave her no feeling of importance. She was through with college now. It was through with her.

She took her diploma back to her stripped room and put it in one of her open, already packed suit-cases. A week ago the room had been very pleasant with its India print on the bed,

its full bookcases. It had been a place where her friends liked to come, and less-important students felt it an honour to be invited here. Now it was anyone's lodging. The academic cap and gown that Clare had worn in the chapel went into her trunk. She locked that and labelled it for shipment to her mother's house, suddenly feeling a sharp twinge of loneliness because the trunk was going home and she was not. There would be lilacs in the yard now. Summer came later in St. Ives than here. She knew just how the house looked, always needing paint, and inside cushions covered the worn places in the sofa and the rugs were thin and shabby. But it was home. Everyone else was going home.

Now she was ready, in her dark blue linen dress, for the Senior luncheon and later for the train to New York. It was time for lunch. But Clare stood at her uncurtained window looking out at the familiar buildings, at the rich green of the pines and the grass, the black, soft walks over which she had hurried so often. She felt dispossessed and placeless. She ached with separation. No, she thought, I won't go to the luncheon. I've said good-bye. If I leave now, I can take an earlier train and be in New York by the middle of the afternoon. I may be able to see Mr. Morel this afternoon. When I'm started it won't be like this. She picked up a suit-case in each hand and went down the corridor, trying to capture the spirit of which she had boasted in her talk.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE Centurion Publishing Company was located in what must have been a stable yard when New York was much younger. It occupied a low, obviously renovated and extended building back of a row of old-fashioned formal residences not far from Fifth Avenue. There were a couple of girls typing in the first office that Clare entered. They acted as if she were quite invisible. After a moment's hesitation Clare saw the words EDITORIAL OFFICES blackened on an opaque glass door at one side. The girls did not interfere or even look up as she tried the knob. It opened and she was in a smaller office where a woman who looked like a precise, ageing school teacher was behind a desk.

She asked pleasantly, "Can I help you? "

"Why," said Clare, "I wanted to see Mr. Morel if possible. My name is Clare Joyce."

"You surely didn't have an appointment for today?" inquired the woman as if someone had blundered.

"Not a definite appointment. But Mr. Morel wrote me a letter and suggested that I come to see him when I came to New York."

"Was it a letter about a manuscript? I'm Miss Ruggles, Mr. Morel's secretary. I take care of his mail and I don't recall——"

"It was about a review of the Hauptman book that I wrote. It was published in the Vassar magazine."

A college magazine seemed very unimportant here. But it placed her. Miss Ruggles said, "Oh yes, I remember now. It's Miss Joyce, is that right? I called your review to Mr. Morel's attention. I thought you made some very interesting comments. I know Mr. Morel will be sorry to have missed you. He sailed for Europe only yesterday morning."

"Oh, he did," said Clare flatly.

"He'll be back about the middle of August. You must come in to see us again. But do call for an appointment first. Mr. Morel will have such a crowded desk on his return."

"Yes, I'll call first," said Clare. She stood there baffled but not willing to give up. "I wonder if I could see one of the editors of *Centurion Magazine* then. I have some stories with me——"

"I'm afraid no one is available this afternoon." Miss Ruggles sounded firm and protective of editors. She looked at the envelope Clare was holding. She said, "If you wish to leave your stories I could give them to the reading department. Unsolicited manuscripts always go to our readers first, of course."

"Of course," said Clare. "Well yes, I would like to leave them."

Miss Ruggles took the envelope and removed the manuscripts. She took a printed slip from a pile on her desk and began to note down the titles.

One of the girls who had been typing put her head inside the door and said, "Tony Delchamp is here, Miss Ruggles. Can you see him?"

"Oh yes, in just a minute. What is your address, Miss Joyce?"

"I'm not sure about that yet," said Clare. She had checked her luggage in the Grand Central Station and wasted no time in seeking her fortune. "I've just come to the city."

"We must know where to reach you," Miss Ruggles said severely. She looked away from Clare and smiled. "Hello, Tony," she said.

"Hello, Jane dear," said a man and he made it very personal. With those three words, addressed to someone else, Clare first savoured Tony Delchamp's charm. And she wasn't even looking at him.

Miss Ruggles said, "I'll be right with you, Tony. Mr. Morel made a few notes for revision but he was delighted with the story."

"I was pretty sure he would be," said Delchamp. He was surveying Clare with approval and enjoyment.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," he said but did not leave the room.

Clare said, in fear that Miss Ruggles would return the manuscripts to her now, "I can telephone my address later. Surely by tomorrow."

"Well," said Miss Ruggles, "it's rather irregular but I suppose that will be all right. But please realize that we can take no responsibility for loss of manuscripts, although we exercise every care——"

Delchamp said in an amused way, "I think we can trust them. They're pretty reliable about this place."

"Oh, I know that," said Clare. "Thank you so much, Miss Ruggles."

Miss Ruggles nodded, in a thank-me-for-nothing-this-is-routine way. But Tony Delchamp held the door open for Clare. It was only a courteous gesture but he managed to create the effect of a meeting, and a parting that held a little reluctance. Clare saw him fully as she went out. He was much older than she was, probably past thirty, with a narrow, clever face and a thin body in well-tailored clothes. He was not tall, nor did he need to be for he had grace without height. His eyes were disturbing, his glance flattering and yet unsparing. Clare did not remember the colour of his eyes when she described him to herself later on but she felt that she had been seen and been noticed by a very handsome and clever man. It was slightly dazzling. On her first afternoon in New York she had been in the same office with a successful author whose story delighted Mr. Morel.

But the first necessary thing was to find a place to live and to figure how to get along on what money she had until she sold some of her work. Clare spent the first night on her own in New York at a hotel for women, which the college authorities approved for its students when they came to New York to go on field trips to museums or to hear operas. Clare had stayed there before several times. But the next morning she took a bus down to Greenwich Village. She had been there also with some of her friends once or twice when they were on mild escapades, and had long since decided that she would like to live there. She wandered around its tangled streets for hours, making inquiries here and there.

The available rooms seemed expensive. But she must have an address to give to Miss Ruggles. At intervals that day Clare could not help imagining what might be happening in the inner offices of the publishing company. A reader might even now be looking up from the manuscript of one of her stories and exclaiming, "This is unusual. This is good!" or "We certainly want to publish this!" or "We want more of this writer's work."

She decided to take a room in a house on East Ninth Street. It was a poorish stretch of street at that point, with irregular, unplanned brick tenements, separated from each other by a few long-lived frame houses, the sort of street where pavement repair is neglected and even the street cleaner scamped the corners which gathered old papers and debris. Clare's room was on the third floor at the rear. It was kalsomined in pink and there was a broken window-box outside the single window in which shreds of dead flowers clung to clots of dirt. There was a bed, a bureau, a table and a rocking-chair that belonged in a larger room. It did not depress Clare. It excited her. She paid her rent for a week and felt she had begun a new life.

Miss Ruggles was not in the office when Clare telephoned her address but one of the typists took the information and said she would pass it on. Clare would have been more concerned about money if her manuscripts had not been in the Centurion office. But there they were and Mr. Morel himself

had praised her work. She had left four manuscripts and if only two of them were bought she would probably have enough to live on for some time, while she started a novel. The atmosphere for a novel was around her. She was sure of that. There was a studio in the front room of the third floor and a very large framed sketch of a naked girl hung on a wall. Clare found cheap places to eat in the neighbourhood and nearly everyone looked poorer than she did.

She did not look for a job at once because if Centurion liked her work anything might happen. She wrote descriptions in her notebook, waited for the mail, and almost immediately made a few acquaintances, for contacts in the Village were easy. She shared bottles of red wine and listened to discussions that made her collegiate criticism of society seem polite and puny. Anarchism, free love, world strikes and sabotage were talked about with a passion for upheaval.

Ten days later all her stories were returned. There was no letter, no word from any editor, nor even a message from Miss Ruggles. Only a printed rejection slip, thanking her coldly for submitting her work to the magazine. It was completely unexpected. Clare had thoroughly hypnotized herself with hope. The manuscripts came in the late afternoon. Until the next morning she hardly admitted that it was true. Finally she faced the fact that her money was running out. She must get a paying job until she found some editor who appreciated her work.

She tried publishers' offices and magazines and newspapers at first, but found no job. She was well educated but quite untrained. Her typing was faulty and amateur and she did not know anything about shorthand, or even filing. Clare was determined not to clerk in a big store where she would be among commonplace women shoppers all day. For several months she was a waitress in a second-class restaurant on Fifth Avenue and got accustomed to picking up dimes and nickels left for her under coffee cups.

After a couple of weeks she rented a typewriter and wrote a short, bitter story about a waitress and her tips. She sent

that with her other stories to all the important magazines. They came back with cruel regularity and she had to retype some of the pages which were becoming dog-eared. She did that after work was over in the restaurant, and when she was exhausted by heat and effort she would go out to drink coffee in one of the basement places where the Villagers stayed up until all hours, sitting around guttering candles on bare wooden tables. The potential superiority of art and ideas that swaggered about the Village helped her. The contempt for success was comforting.

But Clare did not blend completely into the life around her. She locked her door at night and slept alone. The arguments about free love did not rouse any personal desire in her for any of the men she saw. She liked best the company of a young man called Lee Havighurst who often came into the Blue Onion for a late drink. He was writing a novel and had arrogant confidence in his own talent. He would sit at a table with Clare and satirize everyone in sight. And occasionally he tossed her a piece of advice.

"You won't get anywhere without an agent," he told her. "The magazines that pay anything buy only from agents."

"Have you an agent?"

"I wouldn't commit myself to any of them until I've finished my novel."

When her sixth rejection slip came along, Clare flung it into the pasteboard carton that served as a wastebasket in her room. Next day, when there was a lull in trade at the restaurant, she looked in the classified telephone directory for the names of literary agencies. There were only a few listed and for her one suddenly stood out from the rest.

ANTHONY DELCHAMP, LITERARY AGENT

"Why," said Clare, speaking aloud to no one in her astonishment, "I thought he was a writer! I've kept looking for his name on magazine stands. Maybe it's not the same person. But it's such an unusual name."

To go to the office of the agency meant taking a day off from work and her meagre pay would be docked. But she felt she must take the chance and she was very curious about the man called Delchamp. She hardened herself to the possibility that it might be a footless chase, that he might not even see her. She was not so ingenuous as she had been when she called on Mr. Morel in June.

The Delchamp office was on the ninth floor of a building on a side street near the Broadway theatre district. The furnishings did not look affluent but the place felt busy. The first person to whom Clare talked was a plain girl, not much older than herself. She was pale, with lank brown hair and a beautiful, welcoming voice. The other occupants of the room were a fat, mannish-looking woman and a young boy who wore glasses and looked as if he should be in school. Both were reading manuscripts.

The plain girl was the receptionist and evidently had some authority. She asked Clare a few preliminary questions and wanted to know if she had been able to get any of her work published.

"Only in a college magazine."

"That's a little different from professional writing," said Mary Floyd, "but we're always interested in seeing the work of a prospective client. If Mr. Delchamp should think he could be useful to you—he's still out to lunch—oh, here he comes now. Tony, this is Miss Joyce who is interested in talking to us about her work. I haven't seen her material," added Mary Floyd warningly.

Tony Delchamp was looking at Clare. He said, "Haven't we met somewhere? "

"Just for a minute one day. In the Centurion office."

"Sure, I remember. The girl without an address. How did you come out with Centurion? "

"I didn't. They sent everything back."

"Oh well," said Tony Delchamp, "that doesn't mean anything. Did you try your stuff anywhere else? "

"Yes, I have."

"Where?"

She told him and his brows went up. Mary Floyd's expression was inscrutable.

"Oh," said Tony Delchamp. "So you want me to have a look?"

"I'd be awfully grateful if you would."

"I'm in the business," he said.

"What—what would it cost to have you read them?"

He contemplated her again. He said, "Nothing, unless I can sell something for you. In that case, it's ten per cent. If I think your work is unmarketable I won't waste my time or yours. I'll give you a frank opinion. Suppose you drop in again about Thursday of this week."

She had three days of active hope for that was on Monday. Then she ran the risk of losing her job by staying away from the restaurant for another afternoon. She pleaded that she had to go to the dentist again.

Mary Floyd wore the same expression, neither yes nor no.

"Yes, he is in," she said, "but he's on the phone. It's long distance and may take a few minutes."

Tony Delchamp had a little office, only big enough for himself, a desk, two chairs and a view. It was an unpretentious view of the backs of unmatched buildings and a miscellany of city life and work. Clare came to know it by heart, winter and summer. She came to love the struggles and successes and even the tart taste of the disappointments that went on within those three walls and the big window that was the fourth one. She never forgot that first talk with Tony. She overlaid it with other talks and many changes and other years. She forgot exactly where it was and never looked for it. But it was still there, down deep under all the other things.

"Cigarette?" he asked.

"Thanks," she said. She had begun to smoke regularly but her hand trembled as he held the match close.

"Well," he said and smiled at her, "I'm sorry."

"That bad, are they?"

"They certainly have no chance in the present market."

"I don't want to waste your time," she said, "but could you give me a general idea of how to improve them so that they would be marketable?"

He looked down at her manuscript, apparently picked her first name off the title page, and said, "The trouble is, Clare, that you can't write fiction."

"Of course I'm just beginning."

"I don't think it's there. I don't think that's your line. I may sound brutal but without flattering myself I believe I can feel a talent. There is none in these things of yours. They show intelligence, some good observation, information out of books—but they just aren't stories. There's no life in them. Maybe there's a little stirring of it in the story about the tips and the restaurant but that's an incident, not a tale. Tell me, did you ever meet a prostitute?"

"Not personally. But I know the kind of life they lead."

"Oh, you do," he said and she blushed and he laughed. In humiliation she reached for her manuscripts and gently he pushed them towards her across the desk.

He said, "I did feel after reading these stories that the writer was very interesting. There's organization. And they show work. But they don't come off. I think it wouldn't be friendly to encourage you to keep on with fiction."

"I'll have to decide that," said Clare.

"Sure you will. But if you happen to come to the conclusion that I'm right, you may be grateful to me some day."

"I'm grateful now," said Clare. "I thank you very much! I'm ashamed to have wasted your time."

"Don't feel like that about it."

"I wish I could repay you—that you'd charge me something . . ."

"We might barter," he said. "I've given you some time. How about giving me some of yours? How about having dinner with me?"

"Dinner?"

"Yes. Not at the minute. It's only three o'clock. But maybe tomorrow night?"

"But there's no reason why you should——"

"Oh yes, there is. I want to sit across from you at a table and feast my eyes. You are a very beautiful girl."

Their eyes met and she realized that she was beautiful. The men who had grabbed at her now and then in the Village or in the restaurant where she worked hadn't made her feel like that.

The memory broke off there. It was all in one piece, quite whole and disconnected from what came later. I must have been a very brash girl, thought Mrs. Jerome Tarrant, as she walked up Madison Avenue. I was pretty cocky. No, I wasn't actually, I was scared to death when I came here the first time on my own, with hardly any money, only about a hundred dollars, including the fifty that Uncle Paul had sent me for a Commencement present. Of course the fare didn't amount to much and I counted on selling those terrible manuscripts I brought along. One of them was that story about the death of a prostitute. I'd never seen a prostitute then, not to recognize one. I was a Vassar virgin when I wrote that, and the only beds I was familiar with were the one with the brass knobs that I slept in at home in St. Ives and the maple one in my room at college. But I thought I could write. I was disillusioned about that before very long. What was it that Tony said? That I'd never be a writer but that I had a good ear for writing—something like that. I didn't want to believe it at first but of course he was right. Tony was very shrewd in his way.

She noticed a girl hurrying into an office building. The girl wore a short black suit and her thin legs were cased in *scarlet* wool so smoothly that she was probably wearing tights. But looked directed and confident, undoubtedly a girl who had a job. Like Belinda, whose mother said that she worked only for money, because she wanted to live in New York.

I wanted to live here too, thought Clare, but I was full of

noble purposes when I came. Money wasn't the point, much as I needed it. I was going to be a crusader. That was the idea then. Girls like me thought we had to reform things, that it was our job to clean up the dirty spots in the world. I didn't get very far with my scrubbing. Tony came along and then there was the war. Long before we got into the first war we spent our time talking about it. War is always a good excuse. It confused me. I never got back on the track that I started on. I was always confused until I married Jerome, always making excuses. But I did work hard. I had to.

CHAPTER SIX

I'VE been starving for the sight of you," said Henry Cowper, "I'm always afraid you may vanish. Or get run over dashing around the streets the way you do."

"I won't get run over," said Belinda, "I'm pretty quick on my feet."

"I don't like you to be alone. Every mile between us seems like a personal enemy sometimes."

"There are no miles now."

"Thank God for that."

"Be happy. It's so good to have you here."

"I feel as if I've come home," he said, "but I should be making a home for you, not letting you do it, Linda. By rights, you should throw me out of your life."

"I wouldn't like an empty life."

"You could soon fill it."

"No, I couldn't," said Belinda, "you can't take your life to the nearest filling station and say, 'Fill it up with love, please. High test.'"

"Maybe not like that. But you'd soon find some man who was free," said Henry. He made himself say it and he was waiting for denial.

"I think that if you hunted for love or made a lot of conditions you'd never find it. It's never in the obvious places. It's

a surprise. A compulsion. You had to call me that Sunday and I had to be there. There's nothing we can do about it, Henry."

Yes, thought Henry, it's compulsion, she's right. Why do I want only this one girl? She's taken me over. She's out of my reach. But no one else will do.

"I must take care of you," he said, coming back to that.

"You do. Would you like a drink?"

"Yes, I would. But how about your grandmother?"

"I told her we'd be there about eight. We have half an hour. Scotch?"

"I'll get it. What would you like?"

"Make me a Martini. Clare will be having those. She always does. I'll go along with her."

"She sounds pretty sprightly."

"I must tell you about Clare. She's quite beautiful even now, unless she's changed since last March. And to me she always has been one of the most romantic people in the world."

"Come with me," said Henry, "I don't want you out of my sight."

She went into the kitchenette with him. There were two pots of growing herbs on the shelf near the glassware, and Henry remembered the Saturday when they had been wandering on unfamiliar streets in the Syrian district and come upon that curious little grocery store.

"Still using those things?" he asked.

"They're delicious. I must make you an omelette with herbs. Maybe some night."

There would be tomorrow. More time after that. Some night, she said. There was a small future ahead and he would not look beyond it for a few hours. How orderly her small equipment was. Henry liked that. There was nothing tawdry or slovenly about Belinda. Not a girl in a million would have an apartment like this. And he knew it ate up her salary. She spent as little as she could on clothes. She took buses or

walked. There wasn't a greedy bone in her body. But she wanted a home and she'd made one.

The building had once been a co-operative venture and a good deal of imagination had gone into its construction. But deaths and estate entanglements had resulted in cutting up the original big apartments and offering smaller flats for rent. Belinda had two rooms and the kitchenette. Her sitting-room overlooked the East River. When the yellow window-curtains were pulled back it was possible to see part of the basic layout of the city, one of the reasons why it was there. Possibly fishing boats and tugs might be trundling along in the murky water below.

Henry mixed her cocktail and touched her lips before he gave it to her. To steady himself, to bring himself back to earth, he said, "So you have a romantic grandmother. Who takes after who?"

"The reason she may have always seemed so romantic was because Jerome was always so much in love with her."

"Her husband?"

"Her second husband. I don't remember her first one, who was my mother's real father. He died when they hadn't been married very long. There always seemed to be something a little obscure about him. I know that he died in England during the First World War, but he wasn't in it. Clare married Jerome when I was only three or four years old, so for me he was always her husband. He was the man in the family when I was growing up."

"Your father was in the last war, you told me."

"Yes. He was killed. We lived in Washington then. He had been in Congress but he was quite young for that. I can remember only fragments about my father."

"Don't be sad, darling."

"I'm not. I'm just remembering. I must tell you more about Clare. She used to run a literary agency here in New York. That was before my time but I think she was very successful. She's a fabulous person."

"I'm beginning to be afraid of your family. Your mother

is a political big shot and now your grandmother turns out to be another celebrity——”

“Clare is very different from my mother,” Belinda said, “you’ll see.”

She added with a little sigh, “I don’t disappoint Clare the way I do my mother.”

“You couldn’t disappoint anybody.”

“Yes, I do. But anyway Clare’s not a celebrity now. She gave up the work she used to do when she married Jerome and they lived in St. Ives after that when they weren’t travelling. I suppose he wanted her all to himself. He certainly had her.”

“What was his business?”

“Jerome was head of an electrical company. Does Charters Electric mean anything to you?”

“I should say it does. He was president of Charters?”

“Yes, I’m sure I’m right. He was very important until he retired and it showed in his manner even after that. Not that he was pompous at all but he had an air of being used to controlling things and people, of taking care of situations. Jerome always gave me the most complete sense of safety. Without putting a fence around me. Do you know what I mean?”

“I think maybe I do.”

Belinda said, “When he came into a room everything fell into place and was all right. He was bigger than trouble. I can’t express it very well. But sometimes you make me feel the same way.”

“I make you feel safe?”

“It’s better than being safe,” she puzzled, “because it isn’t dull and safety would be that. Neither Clare nor Jerome was ever dull. They lived in a quite beautiful house that they built after they were married and it was a generous place. Clare always had lovely things around her but she didn’t rely on them. They relied on her. It was an exciting house to visit, perhaps because everyone was conscious of that active love between the two of them. Not that they were sloppy

about it. They'd argue. I suppose they must have quarrelled. Clare can lath out. But they never took each other for granted. He kept courting her. He would lift his glass to her and mean it——"

"Like this?" asked Henry.

"Just like that," said Belinda, "thank you, my love. I remember—I might have been about eight years old—seeing Jerome take Clare into his arms one night. I was staying with them that winter because Julia had gone to Congress to fill out my father's unexpired term, and she was living in a hotel and thought that was no place for a child. Clare and Jerome had said good night to me—they were all dressed up and going out to some dinner party—and I watched them from a window in the upper hall as they went out to the car in the driveway. It was snowing a little—there was a kind of golden light from the lights on the front columns and Clare was wearing white furs—she's rather golden herself. And suddenly Jerome turned and folded her into his arms as if he couldn't help it——"

Henry felt as if he couldn't help doing the same thing now but he controlled himself. He was stirred as she recreated the scene. It was not the man and the woman he saw, but Belinda watching them—his innocent girl—and she still was in spite of everything. He felt a kind of gratitude to those people who had shown the child how a man and a woman could feel about each other, and done it so decently. She said she feels safe with me, thought Henry. I must never let that change.

"And now he's dead?"

"Yes. Last March. Clare didn't expect it. I suppose that's the other way that love can surprise you, the ghastly way. When it leaves as suddenly as it comes, goes out of sight and touch and hearing. Clare was incomplete when I saw her again. She was surrounded by people and not paying attention to any of them. It was as if she were listening all the time for a voice she couldn't hear."

She went into the adjoining room and came back with a silver lighter.

"This belonged to Jerome," said Belinda. "Clare said I could have it."

Henry had expected to meet someone who would seem bereft, probably pitiful. The woman who opened the door of her suite for Belinda and himself and took them into a rather splendid sitting-room was not at all the person Henry had built up in his mind as Belinda told him about her grandmother. She certainly was very fond of Belinda. He could hear the tenderness in Clare Tarrant's voice when she welcomed the girl. Of course she couldn't be expected to like me under the circumstances, Henry told himself, as he responded to skilled graciousness that kept him at just the distance she wanted.

He wasn't sure that he liked Clare Tarrant either, although he had thought that he would. There was no doubt that she had been a beautiful woman, and she didn't look much more than fifty now, though she must be considerably older. She gave him the impression that she was by no means through, not yet on the sidelines. But she made no pretence to youth. She wore a black dress and her hair was turning from gold to silver. Her eyes were darkly blue, unfaded.

Henry felt at once that Mrs. Tarrant was a woman of experience. He was aware of how well she was handling this situation which could be embarrassing and strained. He was quite sure, after the first half-hour, that she was dangerous as far as he and Belinda were concerned. The fact that they were in love and unable to marry wouldn't shock her. She would know that could happen often enough. But she would be merciless. She would think he had nothing to offer Belinda and she would try to get rid of him. Henry was sure of it.

Belinda did not seem to feel any danger. She was rejoicing tonight. The sight of Clare and the meeting between her and Henry delighted Belinda.

"I love the way you take possession of any place where you lay your head, Clare," said Belinda, "with all your books and flowers. This seems like your own house already."

"It's hard to make this bowling alley homey," said Clare, "and give me no credit for the flowers. I had a passing moment of economy and only bought the tulips. New York prices are always a shock when you come in from the country. All the roses came from a friend—Jerome's friend more than mine. I'm afraid I rather blackmailed him for them by telephoning this morning that I was in town. And Lee Havighurst sent the birds of paradise an hour ago, for no reason. They do look rather elegant, don't they? By the way, to settle an argument, Linda, do you know who Lee Havighurst is? "

"Of course. He's a writer."

"Do you read him? "

"No. I don't have much time for books like that."

"How do you know what his books are like if you don't read them? "

"I've seen reviews. They weren't very kind. Isn't he quite old? "

"He's a contemporary of mine," said Clare. "Did you ever read any Havighurst, Mr. Cowper? "

"Call him Henry," said Belinda.

"I'd like to. There are no surnames any more except on legal papers and"—Clare stopped with a mental shiver before saying tombstones.

Henry Cowper said, "Why yes. But not recently. I used to see his books around." He knew where he had seen them. In Sylvia's room. She had been crazy about Havighurst stories. Once, when they were first married, he had tried to go along with her and started some book written by that fellow. He couldn't remember the title of it now but it was a lot of conversation. It was pretty sexy, or meant to be, but it didn't get anywhere. That was what Sylvia used to like—when she liked anything. It was impossible that Mrs. Tarrant should know what was in his mind but her glance made him uncomfortable.

"Well, I hope Lee can afford the exotic things," said Clare. "They do help out. I'm not so extravagant as Jerome was, and these rooms need a lavish touch."

"I was telling Henry about Jerome."

Clare said, "Thank you, darling," as if she knew what must have been said. She didn't pursue that. She asked, "Henry, will you manage a drink for us? Everything should be right there on the side table by that roaring fire. I'll have a Martini—there's bourbon and Scotch too."

"I told him you'd have a Martini."

"Don't you keep any of the family secrets, you terrible child?"

"Not from Henry. Anyway, now he knows the family, he'd find out about us pretty quick. Henry's met Julia, you know—before he knew me."

"Oh, did he," Clare's statement was noncommittal. She was thinking, Belinda talks as if it were settled between them. She talks like an engaged girl. She looks at him that way. He's better than I expected, younger than Julia led me to believe. Handsome too, and he looks very competent. I like his control. That's the worst of it, he seems a strong person. Whether we like it or not isn't going to change his mind. He's very much in love with her. This man couldn't be casual if he tried. Neither could Jerome. He was just as determined—but that was different. I was older. I'd been married once and I'd learned to look after myself. I knew what I was getting into. Linda doesn't. Henry Cowper has a wife who may live for ever, from what Julia said, ten years, twenty!—Linda hasn't the faintest idea what it would be like.

Without apparent pause she said, "Your mother seems to be helping to make history. When did you see her last?"

"I went over to Washington one Sunday a few weeks ago. Just for the day."

"She would love to have you with her in Washington."

"I know she thinks so," said Belinda, "but I'd really be in her way. I'd be an albatross around her neck. I'd be no help.

It's such an involved game in Washington and I've never been any good at games. And all that protocol. It's so organized that you move like a robot."

"Your mother likes organization. She was always a born leader."

"My father wasn't, was he? "

"I don't know, Linda. I never knew him very well. He was an idealist, I'm sure of that."

"He was always glad to get home from Washington," said Belinda, "I can remember that much. He used to plan trips and voyages that we were going to take some day—tell me about forests and oceans, foreign places—it seems strange that he ever settled for the Washington routine."

"He adored your mother."

"I expect that was the reason."

This has gone far enough, Clare decided. Belinda shouldn't look at Henry Cowper like that, as if she had discovered an emotional parallel, another excuse for this affair.

"Our family talk can't interest Henry very much," said Clare. And said to herself, I sound and feel like a horrible old dowager.

"Do you like Washington, Henry? "

"I have to do business there. I must admit that I don't like red tape any more than Belinda does. A lot of it is unnecessary, just wastes time and money."

"You live in Chicago, don't you? "

"Yes, Mrs. Tarrant. At present. Our firm has its main plant there."

Now ask him about his wife and if he has any children, Clare told herself. No, I can not. I will not turn the knife.

She said instead, "I'll telephone down to room service and tell them to bring up our dinner. I thought it would be pleasanter to have it served up here. We always used to put the table over there by the windows and watch the lights of the city."

"It's heavenly," said Belinda, "I remember. I had dinner with you up here before."

"With Jerome and me last year. And your young man, Peter what?"

"Pete Sulgrave."

"What did you do with him? He seemed quite firmly attached."

"He's doing time in the forces. In New London."

"Doesn't he ever get leave?"

"Oh yes. He gets here sometimes."

"You must bring him to see me again," said Clare, "Jerome liked that young man."

Henry Cowper was mixing drinks with a deadpan expression but of course he had heard. A cheap and obvious way, Clare told herself, but he will understand that he can expect no concession to an affair between him and Belinda. I will make none, it's much too serious. As she telephoned the waiter, she could see the couple standing by the window. It made Clare feel like a ghost. She knew so exactly what they were feeling, how they could communicate without words, that they were adding another happy moment to their small store of them. They were beautiful together—Belinda so supple and feminine—she was a girl who needed a strong man. There were few men who showed devotion like that. Of course it came after suffering and thwarting.

If she could have had him from the beginning, Clare thought—it's too bad that Belinda wasn't the one that Henry Cowper married in the first place.

"This is Mrs. Tarrant in 1618. I've ordered dinner. You can serve it now."

They talked over the melon and the duckling and the cheese—Clare had ordered the kind of food that Jerome liked—of jet planes and solid fuels and the Formosa Straits and France and the chance of war. Clare deftly led Henry into fields of opinion and Belinda listened, not always agreeing.

"I can hear your sabre rattling, Henry," she said, "it's a horrid sound."

"It's a sound you have to let the world hear sometimes," he said.

He talks just like Jerome, thought Clare. She said, "Jerome and I lived through both wars. He never hated them so much as I did. The most amazing thing is that people can so soon forget what they had felt in wartime. There's a kind of twilight sleep that comes over nations—they can't remember the agony they've gone through."

"Was Jerome in the First World War?" asked Belinda.

"No. That of course was long before I knew him. He was too old for the second one."

"How did he happen to skip the first one?"

"You remind me of a nauseous poster they put out about that time," said Clare. "It was a picture of a mawkish child asking, 'Daddy, what did you do in the World War?' " She was silent for a minute and held them so. Then she said, "Jerome couldn't go in 1917. His first wife was an invalid and dependent on him for everything. He had no money. Finally he made up his mind to go anyway but the war ended."

She did not look at Henry Cowper. She lit another cigarette and told them lightly, "It's very rude of me to tell you two to eat and run but this has been a long day and I am going to finish my unpacking and get to my bed."

"You must be tired," said Belinda, and she looked at Henry quickly. Relief flashed in his face too.

"Some time while I'm here I'd like to see where you live, Linda. Is it comfortable or a dump?"

"It's a charming place," said Henry and wished he had kept still. Clare Tarrant wouldn't miss that implication.

"And some day spare a little time to go shopping with me," said Clare. "Your coat looked a little scuffed, Belinda. What are grandmothers for? Go into my room and fix your face, if you like, and then you and Henry can run along."

Belinda was gone and the door of the bedroom was closed. This was the moment to speak out. He expected it. The strain had come back into Henry's face. The stiffness and resistance he had shown when he came into the apartment tonight were there again.

Clare said, "I'm sorry, Henry."

"I realize what you must think of me, Mrs. Tarrant. I know how it must look to you. I can only say that this is no ordinary thing. There's nothing cheap about it. I have a problem. I try to do my best with it. In law, I'm a married man. In fact, I'm not. All of myself that's important belongs to Linda."

"It never works," said Clare. "Now this may seem enough. Soon it won't be."

"I try not to think farther than the present."

"That isn't fair to her."

"I'll keep her safe. Somehow. I promise that."

"How can you? They are talking about the relations between you and Belinda now. Gossip is no respecter of facts. Her mother is getting vile letters."

"I didn't know that," said Henry, his face becoming grim.

"There's been only one that I know of so far. But there will be more. They breed quickly. It's not necessary to tell Belinda about them, not now anyway."

"Of course not. Mrs. Tarrant, what I want most in the world is to take care of Belinda. I've even told her that she should cut me off, get rid of me. She says she doesn't want to."

"Then you have to make the decision. A divorce isn't possible?"

"I've no legal cause. My wife is helpless. Mentally ill."

"And there's no future——"

"Physically she's quite healthy," he said in a hard voice.

"Poor boy," said Clare. "Henry, I'm not blaming you. No one can help falling in love. I think you're a good man. And for your sake, I'm almost glad you met Belinda. It's given you a glimpse. But it mustn't go on. For the obvious reasons that are so terribly true. You can't protect her. She's the one who would carry the heavy end of the load. I know that. Especially a girl like Belinda, who's not demanding——"

"She's the most generous——"

"Here she's coming," said Clare warningly.

Belinda, buttoned up in the scuffed coat and with smooth shining hair, came towards them. The other two tried to meet

her naturally. They didn't quite succeed for Belinda's glance at Henry was to tell him not to worry.

She kissed Clare. "You were dear—kind—to let us come. It's been a wonderful evening. I wanted Henry to meet you. Thank you so much, Clare."

"Thank you, Mrs. Tarrant," said Henry, "for everything."

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER they were gone Clare wished that she had made them stay longer with her. The impulse to send the two young people away had sprung partly from a proud unwillingness to have her presence tolerated instead of desired, and partly because the talk and the latent situation were forcing her to uncover things in her own past. But I should not have let them go, she told herself. I should have had it out with both of them. Those few words with Henry Cowper will accomplish nothing. One touch of Belinda will wash them out of his mind.

Where will they go now? To dance in some night club? No, not likely, they've passed that kind of pleasure. They will walk for a while or perhaps take a cab and ride in the Park until they feel the carelessness and toleration of the city isolating them and freeing them. Then they may sit for hours in some café which is a favourite place because they had a good time in it before. Or they may go back to Belinda's apartment

Wherever they go, they will talk about themselves and their love. They will rationalize their predicament and think that nobody has done it so well or honestly before. They will persuade each other that life owes them a certain measure of happiness. And that happiness will make them better people,

more useful to the world. They will make decisions and plans that will seem very possible tonight because of alcohol and being together. But when he goes to work in the morning, when offices open and it is time to get on with the job, the plans will seem to him not so practical. Oh I know, Clare said to herself.

I know all about it. How many times have I sat across the table from a man, lingering over a drink. Not because I was thirsty or eager for liquor, but for the sake of talk, working out a complicated situation or thinking I was doing it anyhow, tasting the sweet flavour that trouble can have when two people in love are brewing it together.

But I'll never do that again. I have no personal problems of that kind now, only other people's problems. I'm an onlooker, a bystander. The trouble is that I have never learned how to be impersonal. Julia can be. She is terribly worried about Belinda now, but it's the moral defiance, the break with social organization that disturbs Julia more than the poor girl's feelings. She can't bear to think that her child may become an outlaw. Belinda manages to wring my heart with that look of happiness. I should have talked frankly to her tonight, warned her to go slow at least, tried to get her to promise that much. But I didn't want to spoil her evening, to ruin these few hours she must have been waiting for with so much eagerness. I connived with the two of them, that's what I did.

It seems incredible that I shall never again spend any time working out my own relations with a man, breaking them off or threatening to do it, defending them so often, planning how to make them better. Or just enjoying them. There's no other such exhilaration in the world. But that's all over for me. Jerome is dead. I am too old to interest or excite a man. I no longer want to, so I must be partly dead with him.

After Tony died, it was quite different. I was a widow then too, but it didn't feel like this. Of course Tony never really belonged to me or I to him. When he was gone, I was sur-

rounded by trouble and responsibility, but there were delightful risks and chances. I took plenty of them before I knew Jerome—and after that too. Why shouldn't Belinda run her risks now? Because I don't want her to suffer that way? Or am I only a jealous old woman? She's twenty-two years old. Her mother was born in the year I was twenty-two. And by that time I'd found out that I couldn't count on Tony.

The night maid came into the apartment quietly. She put fresh towels in the bathroom, removed and carefully folded the satin coverlet in the bedroom and turned down the sheet with precision. Mrs. Tarrant, she thought—for she had read the name on a florist's envelope lying on the dressing table—must be very rich. Such lovely clothes in the closets. I suppose the picture in the leather frame is her husband. He's certainly a fine-looking man. With her mind on men, she thought, I'm going to have it out with Bill tonight. Things are going to be different between us from now and I'm going to tell him so in no uncertain terms. Spending his money on that bitch, while I work nights.

She did not go into the living-room of the suite for she could see through the glass doors that the waiters had not yet taken away the table that had been brought up with dinner. Mrs. Tarrant might not have finished though she was standing by one of the windows, looking out at the city. The room was just beautiful with all those red roses. Imagine what they cost, thought the maid. I suppose nothing's too good for her.

One of Tony Delchamp's favourite places to eat was the downstairs restaurant in the old Brevoort Hotel. That was where he took Clare the first time they went out together.

"The upstairs dining-room is full of gilt and curtains with red tassels," he told Clare, "it's for splendid food and drink. But no place to talk. And I want to hear the story of your life."

She wore her best shirt-waister, which had been made by the seamstress in St. Ives. It was white linen with insertions of Irish lace and had a lightly boned high collar which stemmed her neck. Her hat was big, black and shadowy. She had bought it for two dollars and fifty cents in a department store in the interval between his invitation and the dinner.

"My story? It's too commonplace. You could never sell it," she said happily. The sting had gone out of her failure tonight. If Tony Delchamp was taking her out, she hadn't failed completely.

He ordered sherry for her to begin with, and a Manhattan cocktail for himself. It was quite different from drinking red wine and discussing world issues in the Village. This was personal. It had more style. Tony Delchamp's company demanded repartee and humour, not argument. Clare's cheeks and mind began to glow. She answered his half-teasing questions and explained why she did not want to go back to St. Ives.

"Because there's nothing there," said Clare.

"I thought it was the capital of the state."

"Oh that," she said, "it is. Do you like gilded domes? "

"I've never sought one out."

"My family lived in the shadow of one," said Clare. "You see, my father was in politics, in and out of the state legislature. So he neglected the law business, I suppose. Anyway, we were always in debt. You get to know about that when you are quite young. But the worst thing was when there would be an election and my father would be beaten. I remember once, after he lost, that I got up before dawn the next morning and went around the neighbourhood trying to take down the pictures of him that were nailed to fences and telegraph poles. They seemed so cruel. I used to pray to God that he'd win—that was when I thought God was interested in state politics."

"God seems to be no politician," said Tony.

He was admiring her. She could feel that. She wasn't sure that he was listening but she wanted him to know more about her and went on.

"My father died during my first year in High School. We were not quite so pinched for money after that because he had carried so much insurance. And there were no more pictures of him on the fences. It seems unfair to him, doesn't it? Anyway we just went on living in the same house."

"What is it like?"

"A typically ugly Middle Western house wouldn't interest you."

"You interest me," said Tony Delchamp.

That flustered her and she hurried into description. "It's a tired-green frame house with a cupola on one side of the roof. Like a Derby hat that isn't on straight. It's too big for us and it's very run down. But that's where my mother wants to live. Not that she's dominant or demanding about it but it would be difficult to detach her from that house." Clare paused, for a worry about her mother and a slight sense of guilt that were never very far from her mind quickened for a moment. Then, afraid of boring Tony, she said lightly, "You see the house belonged to her parents. She inherited it and nothing else to speak of. Of course Elise and I have to work. Elise took a course in business college and now she has a job in a law office. I probably would have done the same thing but one of my teachers prodded me into trying to get a college scholarship and to everybody's amazement I got one. That's the whole story up to now, unless you want to know what courses I took in college."

"No thank you—I can guess," said Tony. He beckoned to a waiter, who came quickly as to a treasured patron. Tony mentioned another double Manhattan for himself, accepted Clare's refusal and ordered dinner. He told her rather than asked her what food she would enjoy.

His interest in her background, if it had been that, did not last. Before long he was talking about himself.

"I know all about the Middle West," he said.

"You've been out there?"

"No. But I married a girl out of Iowa."

"Oh, I didn't realize that you are married."

"I'm not. But I have been. A couple of times."

"You don't seem that old," said Clare.

"I'm thirty-two. That's old enough to get in trouble."

"Was it trouble?"

"It was hell. Both times."

"I'm sorry," said Clare.

"Now why should you be sorry?"

"I don't know. But I am. It must have been so—disappointing."

He laughed. "That's the word for it," he said. "It was just like seeing your picture on the telegraph posts after you've taken a licking. I was Marcia Page's husband. But after a year another candidate for her affections, if you can call them that, won out."

"Marcia Page? You mean the writer?"

"Don't sound so awed, my dear. You're probably worth a dozen of her. Yes, the writer. And to sell her stuff took some doing."

During that first dinner Clare heard a good deal about Tony's wives and for a while she thought it was the truth. She was immediately sure of one thing. He was not in love with either woman now. No man could feel desire for women whom he lashed with such contempt.

When he left her that night, scowling at her neighbourhood and saying that she must get out of that rat's nest, Clare had the feeling that she had finally latched on to life in New York. Not merely because she was going to see Tony Delchamp again. That much he had carelessly announced, as if she must take his word for it. But she had become aware of a natural power in herself that she hadn't known she possessed. It was like finding out that she could play the piano by ear, without taking lessons, or that she had a gift for hypnotism.

She did not yet acknowledge that she could attract men and make them desire her. She continued to see herself as the girl who had made that Commencement speech and meant every word of it. She did not admit that she no longer felt like that nor even looked the same. But she changed after

Tony Delchamp began to manage her life and to develop her talent for love. It was one of those dates which Clare Tarrant had chosen not to remember.

Tony Delchamp gave her a job in his agency in November. It opened up because Kate Munson, the big woman whom Clare had noticed in his office on her first visit, left to do editorial work on a magazine. Clare was never sure whether or not the editorial job had been part of Tony's larger strategy. In any case it was obvious that Mary Floyd and young Claude Gregory needed extra help and Tony said that he had a hunch that Clare might have a flair for the job. He was right. She fitted into the work quickly. She read manuscripts, kept records of where they were sent, answered letters. It was not so different from the duties of a college editor except that this involved money.

Clare found out that everything revolved about Tony in his agency. The others were there to do the digging, to run errands, to cover up for him if necessary. Tony was the editor-in-chief and the salesman, the one who took promising clients to lunch and was sheltered from contacts with freaks and failures. It was not long before Clare could do her part as well as Mary. She thrived on it. She was so happy that she wrote ecstatic letters to her mother and Elise. She was not even depressed about the war which had broken out in Europe in October and was beginning to spread its tentacles over the world. On Christmas Tony gave both Clare and Mary gold compacts with their initials engraved on them. Clare had never before had a present from any man except her father.

Her salary was small. But it was steady and the agency was always solvent. Mary Floyd kept the books in the office and could be sternly economical when it seemed necessary. Tony Delchamp skimmed the financial cream, when any rose to the surface, but the others in his employment had a living. Soon Clare was able to buy a few clothes, a black suit, because she had heard Tony say that women should always wear black in public. It was trimmed with some anonymous fur and she always was cold in it, but it was very becoming.

For a few weeks after he hired her, Tony paid Clare no personal attention. She was free to admire him, to give him an opinion now and then on some piece of work, to listen to the latest literary joke or piece of gossip going around the trade, but the relation between them was completely professional. Then, on a snowy afternoon in early January, he took her again to the Brevoort for cocktails and dinner. Clare had learned to drink Pink Lady cocktails. Later in the evening he wanted her to go to a hotel with him for the night.

She said, "No, Tony, I couldn't."

"How do you know you couldn't?"

"I wouldn't want to."

"You're a scary child," he said, "it's time you grew up."

"Maybe I'm ignorant. But I honestly don't want to begin that way."

"It's the best way," he said persuasively, "then if we like each other——"

"Suppose we didn't——"

"No harm done. I wouldn't want to wish myself on any girl as a husband. I'm a failure as a husband."

"You needn't fail in anything, Tony."

"Out of the copybook. A cliché. Needn't fail!"

"But I mean it," said Clare, "you could be happy. Like other men."

"Don't you believe it," said Tony. "Anyway you don't want to marry me. I'm going to Canada and enlist and get in the war next week. You might give me a little happiness before I go."

"Don't do anything silly, please, Tony. It's not our war, not yet."

"Then will you do something wise?"

"I can't—I think it would make me sick," said Clare.

He groaned. "You're a bigoted, Middle-western Vassar girl."

"I guess so. Tell the driver where I live, Tony."

He couldn't let it alone after that night. He was obsessed by her and by being thwarted. In February Clare told Mary

Floyd that she and Tony were going to be married the next day by a justice of the peace, and wanted Mary there as a witness. Clare's face was glowing with happiness but Mary looked almost frightened.

"Isn't this pretty sudden? "

"Not really."

"But shouldn't you think it over? "

"I don't have to. I never wanted anything so much. I'm terribly in love, Mary."

Mary said, "Oh, I've known that. It sticks out all over you. But you know about Tony? His marriages and all that? "

"Of course. He was taken in by two hellions, that's all."

"Two——" said Mary.

"Why, Mary, I thought you were fond of Tony! "

"I love the cuss," said Mary, "but marrying is something else. I'm not worried about Tony—he always comes out of everything right side up. But you—you can't expect Tony to be like a lot of conventional men—he's brilliant but——"

"I think I understand Tony," said Clare confidently, "don't worry about me, Mary. Just come and stand by."

That was the year of living in the long, dark flat on 55th Street. Its lack of sunlight did not matter for Tony and Clare never came back to it until evening on weekdays, and on Sundays they slept late and had many places to go. There was happiness perhaps, a delirium of excitement and sensation certainly. Being Tony Delchamp's wife was a brilliant experience at times. But Clare had not known about his black moods. Or that he would stay out all night. She was almost immediately pregnant and was sure of it in April when she told Tony.

"Oh," he said, "careless. But we can take care of that."

"How do you mean? "

"You don't want a baby, do you? "

"Why not? Women do."

"Here? "

"People have babies everywhere. The place doesn't matter at all."

"But what would you do with it?"

"I'd suckle it, I suppose," said Clare, aware that she sounded primitive and feeling very frightened.

Tony burst out laughing and that was Julia Delchamp's welcome. But Clare was stubborn and Tony said that it was up to her. Before long he was quite kind about it. Clare's heart was touched at the change in him, until she found out that he was taking a great interest in a rather beautiful girl called Pamela Stone, who had come over from England with a book about the war which she had written. The worst thing about it seemed to Clare that it was a good book.

Two months before the baby was due to come, Clare's mother died unexpectedly. It was a sharp blow to her conscience as well as to her bared emotions. She went back to the funeral in St. Ives weighted with her child. There were matters in the small estate her mother left which needed to be taken care of, and Clare was more free than her sister to manage them. Elise needed her more than Tony.

She wrote Tony that it was probably better to stay in St. Ives until the baby was born and he answered that the idea made sense to him. He added that he had to go to England for a couple of months anyway. There was a man he wanted to see who had been invalided from the army and was writing extraordinary stuff. Tony wanted to contact him.

There was Pamela Stone too, as Clare knew. But she was helpless. In her condition and with a war going on she wouldn't have been allowed to follow Tony to Great Britain.

CHAPTER EIGHT

No, let's walk," said Belinda, as the doorman of the Embassy Hotel moved inquiringly towards them.

It was a clear night, stiffened with the feeling of frost. Linda lifted the hood of her coat and it seemed to Henry that it was the only kind of covering a woman should ever wear on her head, the simplest and the most becoming frame for a lovely face.

"Where are we walking to?" he asked, slipping his hand under her elbow.

"Up the Avenue. Between the treasure caves—I love shops when they're closed. Let's go up past the rich places where the dogs are walked by valets to where it's natural and there are cats in the doorways. Then maybe back again down Lexington to choose the groceries we won't buy. I never get tired of New York, do you?"

"Not when I'm with you," said Henry. "Are you warm enough?"

"Plenty."

She should have a fur coat, thought Henry. Her grandmother didn't like this one—I do, but Linda should have the best there is. Mrs. Tarrant is going to buy her some new clothes. I wish I could do that. I'd like to buy the most beautiful fur coat in New York for her. Mrs. Tarrant laid it on the

line tonight. What good am I? If I don't protect Linda. She says I can't. But there must be a way. What was in that damned letter that someone sent to Linda's mother? Who wrote it?

"You haven't told me how long you'll be here, Henry."

"Until the end of next week anyhow. Between here and Washington."

"That's wonderful. It's practically living here."

They walked until the buildings grew more scattered and smaller and the wind swept them harder at every corner.

"We'd better get a cab," he said.

"Can we drive through the Park? "

"You bet we can."

He wished that they were in a car of his own, with himself at the wheel. That was how it should be. There was something unpleasant about these sagging leather seats that probably had been used so often for snatches of amorousness. But Linda was with him, what did it matter——

Still it was cold when he put the window down a little to clean the air and, when the window was closed again, the heater of the cab blew too strong. It was hard after he had kissed her once to make himself stop. Henry disliked the cab driver's mirror.

"Let's go some place and have a drink," he said.

"All right. You choose."

He didn't want to go to any cheap place. Mrs. Tarrant's way of living was not going to be undercut. But neither did Henry want to take Belinda to one of the big night clubs. He had no reservation and they might have to stand at a bar. Here they were in a city which had tens of thousands of places of pleasure, and yet it was a problem to find the right one.

"Nobody ever can decide on the picnic place," said Linda.

"How about the Plaza? You liked it there that other night."

"That will be fine."

There was a ball of some sort going on in the Persian Room

of the Plaza and people in evening dress were gathered in groups in the lounges and corridors. Among them Belinda looked very plainly dressed. Henry realized after a minute or two that he expected her to be embarrassed, perhaps to suggest that they go somewhere else. Sylvia would, he thought. But Linda is wonderful. She has the air of a princess.

"It will be quiet in the Oak Room," she said.

They settled in a corner and she let her coat fall on the bench where they sat. The dark stuff of her dress was cut in a wide circle at the throat and her skin was white and never dry, as if some secret spring constantly refreshed it.

"Do you know that you are especially beautiful tonight?" he asked.

"Am I? Isn't beauty a strange thing? You know—I believe people give it to each other. It's not something you have by yourself. Clare's lost so much beauty—it's sad."

"I think she is a very handsome woman."

"Yes, of course," said Belinda, "but you should have seen her when Jerome was around."

"Do you mean that I make you feel beautiful?"

"Oh yes, I've never felt this way. I shall probably become intolerably vain if I see you often enough."

This was his hour. Henry liked taking charge of the occasion. He ordered vintage champagne for her, Scotch for himself because he remembered that he had a big day tomorrow.

"I think we're good for each other," said Henry. "I know that just seeing you makes me a better man. If that's true, if we can bank on that——"

He stopped for he recognized the man at the bar who was watching them, trying to get their attention. It was Bob Sheldon—he was going to be in conference with him tomorrow morning. Sheldon was in evening clothes—he was probably part of that big party in the Persian Room. He was waving a cordial hand—Henry had to respond but he did it with restraint. No use. Sheldon had begun to make his way across the room.

"This is a man I do business with," said Henry in a swift

aside to Belinda, "he's coming over. I can't do anything about it. Have to be civil."

The consternation which underlay his controlled words did not carry through to Belinda. Henry could see that.

"It doesn't matter. He won't stay," she answered quietly. By that time Bob Sheldon was shaking hands with Henry and looking Linda over with inquisitive eyes. Henry had an impulse not to introduce him to her but Sheldon's expectancy made that impossible.

"I'd like you to meet Miss Rood. May I present Mr. Sheldon, Linda?"

Sheldon said that it was a pleasure and that it was good to see Henry. "Terrible mob out there," he said. "I'm absent without leave from my own party but my ears were beginning to hurt. This is the most peaceful place in the hotel. May I do something about ordering a drink?"

"Thanks, but we're all set up, Bob."

Sheldon was talking to Henry but regarding Linda with interest. Henry knew what the other man was thinking. He would see at once that this was not a commonplace New York date and that Belinda was both beautiful and rare. He would wonder who she was and what was going on between her and Henry Cowper. Belinda was attracting Sheldon—his very mouth showed that—and Henry resented it with silent anger. But he had to say, "Why yes, of course," when Sheldon asked if he might sit with them for a minute while he finished his own drink. Sheldon signalled the waiter to bring the glass he had left on the bar.

Meeting almost any other man would matter less, thought Henry. Sheldon was a partner in the investment firm which already had put considerable money into the Victor Company and would certainly be asked for more if the company expanded. Sheldon sat on the board of directors of Victor. Henry knew that Sheldon was a shrewd and able financier but he had never liked him personally. He thought that Sheldon wanted altogether too much authority as well as unnecessary information about operations which he couldn't understand. He

was a glossy-looking man of fifty or more years and very sure of himself. In business conferences he was apt to insert small dogmatic speeches, which were not always relevant but served to focus attention on himself and exhibit his opinions. Some months before his picture had been in *Fortune Magazine*, along with his comments on the qualities necessary for an executive. These he had re-quoted to the Victor directors at their last meeting. Henry had been bored. "Co-operation, stability, adaptability to leadership"—that sort of thing was Sheldon's line. He liked to run off a lot of syllables. He seemed to forget that the main thing necessary to an executive was to know what the job which he controlled was about.

But the fact that Henry was recalling at the moment with special revulsion was that Bob Sheldon had also met Sylvia. It was more than two years ago but Henry remembered the occasion well because Sylvia had been hard to manage that night. That was the last time he had taken her with him on a business trip. It seemed to Henry now that Sheldon was very carefully not mentioning Sylvia and the attempt at tact annoyed him too. Why wasn't Sheldon natural? Why didn't he inquire about Sylvia? There was nothing Belinda didn't know about his marriage. And what right had this character to be asking Linda personal questions and letting his glance roam over her that way?

"Are you a New Yorker, Miss Rood?"

"Really I don't know. What is a New Yorker?"

"Now you've got me." Sheldon chuckled. "I know a lot of people who claim to be New Yorkers and aren't. Perhaps it's a person who lives here and likes it."

"Then I am one," said Belinda.

That left Sheldon still unsatisfied. He asked, "Do you just live here or do you work at something?"

"I work."

"I wonder if I could guess what your work is. It's a game I sometimes play when I meet new people. I'm told I'm rather good at it."

Henry could not stand the fatuousness. He said, "Belinda is on the research staff of a magazine."

"I thought it would be something in the literary line," said Sheldon smugly.

"Oh no, it's not literary at all," said Belinda.

"It's the general field," said Sheldon. "I've had some of you research people interview me from time to time."

Belinda had a defeating way of not saying the obvious. She did not ask who had interviewed him or why and that amused Henry and made him proud of her. How Sheldon would like to know, thought Henry, that her mother is in Congress and that her grandmother's husband was a president of Charters Electric. Then he could really start name-dropping and there's nothing he likes better.

"It must be interesting work," said Sheldon, carrying on alone, "I suppose you have different assignments?"

"Yes, I do what I'm told," she said.

"For example?"

"Well, right now," said Belinda, "I'm getting statistics, as far as they are available, on abortions."

She spoke quietly and cleanly. But the word hurtled into Henry's mind and made him uncomfortable. He wished she hadn't brought that up. Sheldon was the kind of person who would make something of it, build up a story. He would say, "This girl who was out with Cowper is an expert on sex stuff"—why in hell didn't he take himself off? He must know he wasn't wanted.

Sheldon said, "I suppose I'm old-fashioned but sometimes I think too much of that sort of thing is printed in our popular magazines. It's all right for the medical profession, but I'm thinking of the effect on our young people. Beans up their noses—you know what I mean? I believe that if we didn't feature——"

They shut him out as he talked on. They wouldn't argue. They wished him gone until he must have felt it. For at last he stood up and said, "I must be getting back to my party."

They'll think I've deserted them completely. Glad to have met you, Miss Rood. See you tomorrow, young man. Don't oversleep."

Henry made an attempt to laugh it off when Sheldon was gone. He tried to resume possession of his hour.

"Unmitigated gall, his horning in that way. But I suppose he'd had a few drinks and felt popular."

"Why did you mind it so much?"

"I don't particularly like the man. He has all the characteristics of the rich bully."

Belinda looked too thoughtful, was too silent.

Henry said, "He's the kind of character who'd get the wrong idea. He has that kind of mind."

"The idea that we're in love?"

"He wouldn't understand the situation. He's incapable of it."

"Doesn't he know you are married?"

"I suppose so. Yes, he should. If he remembers. Actually he met Sylvia some years ago. Before she went completely to pieces."

"That was it. I knew something was disturbing you. Hurting you. . . . Henry, no one is going to understand, no one could possibly think it's right except us. Not that man. Nor my mother. Nor Clare, after tonight. We can't help that. We can't help it if someone looks at us obscenely."

"I don't intend to allow it," he said sharply.

"I seem like a thief," she said, "but I'm not a thief. All I'm taking is something that doesn't belong to anyone else. And never did. It's mine—it exists just for me."

"Darling, that's the truest thing you ever said."

"But I don't like to have you feel humiliated. By being with me."

"Humiliated! I'm never more proud than when I'm with you!"

"You hated that man's guesses. And what Clare said to you tonight when I was out of the room."

"How did you know she said anything?"

"How could I not know? One look at your face—remember that I love you."

"She didn't say very much. She was rather kind. But she put it to me straight that I wasn't taking care of you. Of course she was only telling me what I know, what burns me up. You should have something so much better than what I can give you under the circumstances. But believe me I'm going to find some way——"

"Nothing is better than what you give me."

"There's no one in the world like you, Linda."

He reached for her hand and was about to lift it to his lips when several men came up to the bar. Henry gave them a quick look.

"Let's go," said Linda and though she spoke softly it was decision.

They did not try another public place. They went back to her apartment. To Linda's home, where Henry was more welcome than in any other place in the world, as he knew. It was orderly and charming as she turned on its lights. Here he could be free from interruptions and untroubled. Here he had found comfort. And rapture. But tonight the bad taste of the encounter with Sheldon was still in Henry's mind, and he was oddly conscious of Clare Tarrant, not so far away and no fool. She would be thinking of him as a man who took love he couldn't pay for. She would be troubled about Belinda.

"You must be tired," he said.

"Why should I be tired?"

"That was quite a walk we took."

"I liked it."

She took off her coat and hung it in the small closet near the doorway. He laid his on a chair. Belinda did not offer him anything to eat or drink. She curled herself up in a chair that was too small for both of them. She was not a housekeeper now, and she never tried to arouse his love. She sat there thinking, letting him think. Her hair was pushed

back from her forehead and in the light of the lamps she looked like a child.

Finally Henry said, "I've been wondering about something."

"Tell me your wonder."

"You won't take it the wrong way?"

"No."

"There must be some place where I can take care of you. You don't need to go running around, working on stuff like abortions. Why should you? Let me take charge. You might like a place in the country where you could have a couple of dogs and get a lot of fresh air and have room to do anything you want. I can well afford it. And, if things work out—I'd make them work out so I could be there quite a lot of the time. It's all a matter of scheduling."

"You want me to be a kept woman?"

"Don't talk like that, Linda."

"That's what I would be."

"Please, darling. You know that all I want is to do something adequate for you. Try to give both of us a place that would be a kind of home."

She made a gesture.

"But this is your place," he protested. "I want to do what a man should do."

"It's better this way."

"I know you love New York but——"

"It's not that. Though I love the city. When that man asked me tonight if I were a New Yorker, I knew that he wouldn't understand if I told him how I felt. If I could tell it. But I don't think I could, especially not to him. What I feel about New York is that it's completely human. Every good and beautiful thing, every bad thing, every crazy thing that you have to know about and like and hate and forgive is there. I suppose most great cities are the same but New York is my own village."

"Funny girl——"

"Not that I wouldn't love to go to the country with you

sometimes. How I would like to look at the mountains with you in the spring——”

“We could get a place near the mountains.”

She said, “No, Henry dear, you can’t have two wives. Not you. In some places men do that but it’s breaking the law for you. You’re a law abider. You’re honest. You promised your wife what they call your worldly goods. . . . You promised to cleave to her—horrible word—and she can’t release you from that promise because she doesn’t think straight. Perhaps she wouldn’t do it even if she weren’t muddled. She’d have the right to refuse and the law would back her up. But she hasn’t any right to a love that didn’t exist until you and I created it together. Sometimes I’m almost happy in thinking that I don’t take a thing that belongs to your wife or make you dishonest—I don’t think I’m rationalizing—it doesn’t feel like false reasoning. It feels like the truth.”

“I’ve made it so tough for you,” he said.

“No. It’s been wonderful.” Her eyes were suddenly startled as she heard what she was saying. “It is wonderful.”

Henry had a flash of fear. He took her hands and drew her up from the chair, holding her straight and close, his lips against her hair, letting the warmth of love envelope them, waiting for the blaze of passion that would consume all doubt.

“I love you, Linda. You’re here. We’re together.”

She released herself gently, as if she might tear something delicate if she were not careful.

“You’ll have a hard day tomorrow, Henry.”

“Don’t worry about that. I have to take a few hurdles, that’s all.”

“I think——”

“What’s the matter, Linda?”

“I think you should go back to your hotel.”

“Now?”

She did not change it.

“I’m a fool,” said Henry, “I shouldn’t have talked like

that. I've troubled you. Forget it, darling. I'll work out something else. Don't send me away."

"I'm not sending you," she said, "I'm thinking of your leaving later, walking those deserted blocks alone, and I know a kind of shame and a feeling that this is not right will creep out of the shadows and walk along with you. Those things are bad company. They'll whisper that you're demeaning yourself, doing harm to me, that it's hopeless—oh I know what it's like for you when I'm not there."

"You're all my life," said Henry, "don't you know that?"

"I'm part of it. But there's the work you have to do tomorrow, the people you meet. They're part of your life too. And tomorrow morning the Sheldon man will be watching you across the table. He'll look a little sly. And you'll hate him because he saw us together." Belinda gave a strange, sad little laugh. She said, "But tomorrow he'll be fooled—he really will have the wrong idea and you'll know that and so you won't hate him so much. He won't bother you because you will know that your love is not like his kind of obscenity."

"Oh my darling, forget about Sheldon——"

"If you could," she breathed. And then, "Henry, give me a present. Give me something I want, will you?"

"What is it? To have me go?"

"I want you to walk away from here tonight loving me with pride. Do it now."

"But I always have pride—I always——"

"Please. Give me what I want."

He lifted her face and looked at it for minutes before he kissed her. Then he let her go and put on his coat.

Hesitant again, he asked, "You mean it? You want me to go?"

She nodded. Words might come out wrong.

"I'll call you in the morning," said Henry. "I've done everything badly tonight. I've hurt you, the last thing in the world I wanted to do. You're pale. I've done that too. Try to rest, Linda. Try to forgive me. It will be different tomorrow."

CHAPTER NINE

THE Victor Company had recently taken offices in one of the great new buildings on Park Avenue. In the morning sun its almost completely glass front was gaily tossing reflections across the street. There was an open space off the sidewalk which was part of its ground floor, a kind of promenade, and there two children were dancing inside coloured hula hoops, as if they were in their own front yard. That is what Linda likes about New York, thought Henry. Anything may happen anywhere. Nothing is ever out of place. And he grinned at the children and wished she could see them. He must remember to tell her.

He had slept badly but his mind was firm this morning. Already he had talked to Belinda on the telephone and told her that he would be with her at seven o'clock tonight. Now he wanted to get to work. He was better than on time for the meeting of the directors, arriving a little early for it.

The offices were small and standardized. Philip Yost, who was chairman of the board, was no waster and cared nothing for front or show. Henry liked to work with Mr. Yost, who had an imagination like a divining rod. He would touch a suggestion or possible project with it and could tell almost at once whether it would be useful or profitable. A tall, spare, Lincolnian figure, always wearing a stringy tie, he put on no

airs of success. In an old-fashioned way he was sternly virtuous about his dealings too. Henry had once told Linda that he would bet Philip Yost knelt down to say his prayers every night and that he probably wore a nightshirt.

The secretary told him to go right in to the private office of the chairman which served also as a board room. Mr. Yost was already there. Harry Jarvis, who headed the Chemical Division located in New Jersey, was there too. Sheldon had not yet arrived, nor Jim Pugh, who was an expert in electronics and had started with Yost on a financial shoestring. With a handful of patents in whose future they had complete faith, the two men had gone out to shake the bushes in various parts of the country, to find the scientists, and the cheap locations, and the enthusiasm they needed to get the Victor Company into action. They had hardly more than the name and a few hundred thousand dollars at that time. They bought out a small, limping, rubber chemical company in Chicago where Henry Cowper had been employed since he had left college. They kept Henry because Mr. Yost felt at once that the young man had the kind of business zest as well as scientific knowledge for which they were looking.

It was still a small board of directors ten years later. Mr. Yost liked to have useful men, not big names, around him. When Henry entered, the chairman pushed back his papers and stood up to greet him. He told Henry that he looked fine and asked about some of his Chicago associates and the weather out there. Then lowering his voice to a different kind of concern he inquired, "How's the little wife?"

"About the same," said Henry, "not too well."

"She didn't come on with you?"

"No," said Henry, "she's not able to travel."

"Too bad. Well, what I always say is that we have to let illness take its own time. Mrs. Yost's arthritis was very severe for some years. I said to her, 'We have to be patient with this thing.' She's definitely better. Ah, good morning, Bob. Good to see you."

Bob Sheldon had come in, his business clothes as perfected as his evening dress had been, and his manner of knowing all the answers just the same. He paid his respects to the chairman and turning to Henry asked if he had a good time last night.

"Yes, indeed," said Henry.

"That was a charming girl you had with you."

It was brash, and awkward too for Henry, to have that comment come just after Mr. Yost had been sympathizing with him about his sick wife. But it did not bother Henry very much. Sheldon didn't annoy him as much as he had last night at the Plaza. He thought, of course Sheldon couldn't imagine—and suddenly realized that Linda had told him that he would feel this way.

Jim Pugh arrived, and Wade. They were waiting for Howard Scott, the lawyer who worked with them.

"Sit here, Henry," said Mr. Yost, indicating the chair at his left, "I want you to take a look at these estimates. But before we settle down to business, I've a message to deliver to you. From Mrs. Yost. She wants you for dinner tonight. We're at the Pierre, in the same apartment. If that place doesn't bankrupt me, nothing ever will. But it's convenient, and with Mrs. Yost's arthritis we have to be independent of domestic help. I often wonder what happened to all the good Irish biddies who used to be glad to get twenty-five dollars a month. That's what my mother used to pay her hired girl. Mrs. Yost said to tell you seven o'clock. She would have called you herself but I wasn't sure where you were staying so I said I'd relay the invitation. It's a small party. Just some of our business family and a couple of others."

"I appreciate the invitation very much," said Henry, "but I'm tied up for dinner tonight. Will you tell Mrs. Yost how sorry I am?"

Mr. Yost was tenacious as well as imaginative. Henry had watched the trait grow in the older man during the past few years. He often carried it past the point of good manners. He would not abandon a plan that he made. If Mr. Yost had

decided that he wanted a steak in the Chicago Stock Yards restaurant, that was where they all had to go.

"You can break your engagement, can't you?" he asked. "I wish you would. Tell you why. This isn't a purely social occasion. General Apps is coming to dinner and I want you to meet him before you go to Washington tomorrow. He can give you some tips, I believe."

"You want me to go to Washington tomorrow?"

"The sooner the better. We're going to have a lot of competition and can't let the grass grow under our feet."

"I know that," said Henry.

"The General can help us quite a lot. He's retired of course but he's in constant touch with the Pentagon and he was popular over there. You beg off from that other engagement. You can say it's because of business and be telling the truth. Mrs. Yost will dine with us but she has to go to bed early. Doctor's orders. Then we can chew the rag for a while."

"I don't see how I can," Henry began and then he saw a wise, amused look on the face of Bob Sheldon, who was sitting across the table from him and must have heard all this. He was guessing what Henry's engagement for tonight was, and guessing right, damn the fellow. He was probably going to the Yost dinner. And he would be perfectly capable of saying on the side to Mr. Yost, if Henry were not there, "Henry has a very attractive friend here in New York. A girl who works on a magazine. She told me she was investigating abortions. These girls are nothing if not broadminded. Of course no one can blame Henry for playing around a little under the circumstances."

It was a business dinner. Part of his job. General Apps was a good man to know.

"But I'll see if I can fix it. Of course I'd like to come very much, Mr. Yost," said Henry.

"We'll be counting on you," said Mr. Yost with affable authority.

Mr. Scott arrived as if he were the first to come instead of the last. Infantile paralysis had left him with a limp and,

when he was not on a horse, he carried a cane. He was one of the best corporation lawyers in New York and it was a tribute to the growing respect in which Victor was held that Howard Scott was willing to take on its legal problems.

Finally there were eleven men around the table. It was always exhilarating for Henry to attend one of these meetings. He didn't talk much himself, unless he was asked a question that he was best fitted to answer. He was a production man and these were policy makers. But each time he was here the others paid more attention to what he did say. He knew what the future for himself might be without trying to blueprint it even in his thoughts. Mr. Yost was sixty-three, Curt Wade a year or two older. In a company like this there was no precise retirement age, but, when some plan which would not be fully developed for ten years came up, it was impossible not to be aware that a decade would make a difference in the composition of this group. And authority would have to go to someone who fully understood the job. Of course a man could be brought in from the outside or meshed in through consolidation with another company which was developing solid fuels. Bob Sheldon would like that. He hinted at the benefits of a merger this morning as he spoke of big money behind Columbia Dynamics. He had begun by commenting on the report of the treasurer and went on to tell of some conversations he had recently had with men of great fortune.

"Nothing definite was mentioned of course," said Sheldon, "but Harry Furgate—he's on their board and I happen to know him very well personally—certainly seemed interested in what Victor is doing. I just mention it for what it's worth. But, as they say, if you can't lick 'em, it's sometimes the thing to join 'em."

"We don't have to join anybody, Bob," said Mr. Yost. "As I see it, we're in the driver's seat and some of these fellows, even the rich ones, are just trying to hook a ride. They've got cash but no transportation. They haven't got the patents, or the machinery, or the skill that we have. We can get

along without them. I think we'll be able to raise the money we need. We've always paid our bills even when we had to scrape the bottom of the barrel to do it. I would genuinely dislike to see this company get too big for one man to understand it from beginning to end."

"Mergers present a great many complications. They can be delaying," said Mr. Scott.

"What we have to do right now is to discover what the government wants and how far we can supply it," said Mr. Yost. "We're trying to find out about that. Henry Cowper here is going to Washington tomorrow to ring a few doorbells. He'll see Senator Hume on the armed services committee and some of the top men in the Pentagon, I hope, and he can explain our product and our possibilities. You're a good salesman aren't you, Henry?" He ended on a note of pleasant kidding.

The mention of Senator Hume reminded Henry that his wife's uncle had not been his usual cordial self last time they met. There had been a subtle impasse—questions too, but perhaps they meant nothing. Could the Senator have received a letter of the kind that had been sent to Belinda's mother? Mr. Yost was looking at him with a smile and Henry grinned back and said he'd do his best to get his foot in the door.

"How about space on the plane, Henry? You haven't any, have you?"

Mr. Yost thought of things like that for he was a man who had never lost the habit of attending to details.

"No, sir. I didn't know when you wanted me to go."

Mr. Yost said to the stenographer in attendance, "Go out and tell Miss Flack to make a reservation on an early plane to Washington tomorrow for Mr. Cowper." With that arranged, he went back to the subject under discussion. "No, gentlemen. I think we'll do better to ignore these people who want to nibble at our piece of cheese."

Bob Sheldon looked nettled. But he'll go along, thought Henry. He'll get us the money we need. Mr. Yost knows

that he will. We're showing too good a profit for Sheldon to let his firm drop out now.

On another level of his mind Henry was planning. He would call Belinda at noon and explain about dinner. She would understand the pocket he was in. She was never unreasonable and he could leave the Yost party early and join her. They would have hours together tonight. He thought, it will be better tonight. Perhaps——

The reports and discussions went on. Miss Flack, the blonde girl, came in and passed a note to the red-haired stenographer. She glanced at Mr. Yost and when there was a break for a general laugh over some remark, she spoke to him. Mr. Yost listened and then turned to Henry again.

"What do you know! They've tried all the lines and there is no space on any plane available between here and Washington tomorrow morning. Must be a jamboree over there. Nothing until 2 p.m. That would get you there when everyone is going home."

Sheldon said, "Nearly all companies have a plane or two of their own these days. There's an executive type one that's very comfortable. The Willard Company always send their plane for me when they need me in Detroit."

"This company never owned an auto," said Yost, "just trucks. I don't know that we need have a private plane and pilot sitting on his hands half the time. You could take the train over tonight, Henry. You'd better do that so you can get a good start in the morning. Tell Miss Flack to get Mr. Cowper space on one of the night trains to Washington. They leave about midnight but there's one that you can board before eleven o'clock, Henry. You can go right from our place to the train."

"I'm sorry," said the girl at the magazine switchboard, "I don't know where I could reach Miss Rood."

The voice was high and typed. To Henry it sounded almost mocking.

"When will she be back in the office?"

"I can't tell you that. Sometimes she does not come in during the afternoon if she is on an assignment."

"Do you know what assignment she is on today?"

"I'm sorry. I do not have that information."

"Someone must have it," said Henry.

"I'm afraid I can't help you."

Henry rang Linda's apartment but there was no answer. He left the meeting several times during the afternoon to call the magazine office repeatedly but it was futile. She was somewhere in this city of millions and she was expecting to see him at seven o'clock, when he was now obligated to present himself at the Yosts' apartment. I'll skip that dinner with the old man, thought Henry angrily. I just won't show up. I'll make some excuse. But I should meet the General. And there may be things that Mr. Yost wants to tell me tonight, matters he wouldn't bring up in a meeting of the board. I've got to go to his dinner.

The formal meeting of the board of directors adjourned at noon. But after lunch there was another long session dealing with technical matters. At times Henry would be caught up in it completely. Then the ache of frustration and disappointment would begin again. It was after five o'clock in the afternoon before the conference broke up and he went back to his hotel and the telephone. At half past six he finally heard Belinda's voice. It sounded a little breathless.

"At last I've got you! Are you all right?"

"Why of course. I just came in this minute. I had a little shopping to do."

"I've been trying all day long to get you on the phone. Where have you been?"

"I went to Brooklyn to visit a home for girls. It's part of this research I'm on. I didn't expect you'd be calling again after we settled on seven o'clock."

"That's the trouble. I'm in a jam. Mr. Yost is pulling off a

business dinner tonight and he insists that I be there. I couldn't get out of it, darling."

"It's all right. Come when you can."

"The worst of it is that he wants me to go to Washington on the night train. Things are popping fast and we don't want any of our competitors to get ahead of us. You see how it is?"

"Of course I do."

"But I want to see you so much. You don't know how much, Linda."

"I'll guess——"

"I'm up against the axe. I may be tied up with these people until train time. It wasn't possible to get space on a plane tomorrow morning and so I'm going by slow freight at eleven thirty."

"Don't worry about it, Henry."

"I worry about you. I'd like to come out right now."

"What time is this dinner?"

"He said seven."

"Then there isn't time."

"Will you forgive me, Linda?"

"For what?"

He said, "I shouldn't have left you that way last night."

"But you really were glad you did."

"No. Especially not now, the way things are turning out. My darling, I'm so mixed up about us. I'm no good to you. But I've got this job on my hands and I've got to deliver."

"How did your meeting go?"

"Just fine," he said in a different voice, "the company is really on the move."

"You sound excited about it."

"I am. But when am I going to see you?"

"When you come back. If you do."

"Of course I will. I hate to leave you now. It's like—it's not right. Are you going to be there all evening?"

"I'm not sure now."

"I want to talk to you again before I go. I'll call later on."

"Sometimes the telephone makes it worse, you know."

"Yes it does. Linda, I think I'll skip this Yost dinner."

"You think you should?"

"I shouldn't for one reason. There's an old General who's going to be there who might be very useful——"

"Then you're not to skip it. I wouldn't let you—it would bother you—good-bye now, you'd better have a shower and don't worry."

Belinda had laid down several packages while she answered the telephone. Now she opened them, putting the eggs in the refrigerator and the cheese in a jar. She touched one of the pots of herbs on the shelf regretfully as if apologizing because there would be no omelette tonight.

For Henry it seemed an interminable evening. He saw that the divining rod of Mr. Yost's imagination had been accurate as usual. It was a good thing for him to meet General Apps. He was pompous but intelligent and he believed in the use of solid fuels for rocket engines. Henry had been old enough to serve in the Army during the last year of the Second World War and knew that his job was to listen deferentially while the general explained what Henry knew already.

"Who are you going to see in Washington?" asked General Apps.

Mr. Yost said, "Senator Hume has been helpful. He's on the Armed Forces Committee and that's all to the good."

"Senator Hume is a fine man."

"He's a relative of yours, isn't he, Henry?" Yost asked.

"A connection. He is an uncle of my wife."

"That's fine. Give the Senator my regards and tell him that I believe—and I've had considerable experience with propulsion units——"

Henry was thinking, who could have told Senator Hume anything about Linda and myself? He was the person who introduced me to Linda's mother. Before that day—there had been a time when I didn't know that Linda existed and

now she means more than anyone else in the world to me. And she is here, in New York, tonight, and I can't be with her. I have to butter up this old General.

"I was sorry to hear that your wife is no better," said Mrs. Yost. "She's had such a difficult time, hasn't she?"

"Yes—very difficult——"

"It is so hard to see a loved one ill."

Sylvia had never been a loved one. She didn't want love, thought Henry. I know the difference now, I know what love is. And Linda is in that room across town all alone. I must get out of here and talk to her.

But it was after ten o'clock before he could leave. Mr. Yost wove the discussion around Henry's expert knowledge and kept him answering questions on technical matters. Finally Henry said he must go, and escaped. In the lobby of the apartment building he found a telephone and dialled the familiar number. Steady ringing brought no answer. She could not be there. Frustration began to turn to fright. He had told her that he would call again tonight. But would she sit there, waiting for a word over the telephone with a man who had broken a date with her? Was she hurt? Was this silence telling him she was through with him? Had Mrs. Tarrant interfered, persuaded Belinda of futility, of danger? Had he disappointed her last night by taking her at her word?

Where was she? She might have gone for a walk. She shouldn't walk alone at night. I must tell her so again. What right have I to tell Belinda anything? Perhaps she was having a bath and the water was running so she hadn't heard the telephone. Henry looked at his watch and damned the passing of time. Could he taxi out to her place and get back to the Pennsylvania station in time to take the train? No, it wasn't feasible. I'll call her from the station, he thought drearily.

Frowning and unhappy, he went into the great terminal. The light that flooded it was dull, as if the vast spaces it had to fill exhausted any brilliance. Looking again for a telephone,

the only tool his love had a chance to use now, he went through the waiting-room where people were settled on benches, dozing, reading newspapers, clinging to handbags. Belinda stood up, suddenly emerging from all those people who didn't matter to him. Her face was pale in the grim, generalized light. She looked thin. Her smile was not quite certain. Henry saw her not as a beautiful girl but as the woman he loved, with complete conviction.

"Linda!"

"Are you glad to see me?"

"Oh, my God, am I glad——"

"I did hope you'd be alone. I wanted to see you off."

"There was never anything so kind, nothing so dear as this. It's been torture not to be with you all evening."

"I'm here now," she said, claiming the present moment as she always did.

He took her hand and they walked together, looking for a place without people. Behind the high back of a deserted bench he kissed her and tried to say it all at once.

"It's no good, not being together. I want to live with you—this isn't right for either of us. When I saw you there, as if you belonged to me——"

"I belong as much as I can," she whispered against his shoulder.

"How can I leave you tonight? Linda—will you come?"

He could feel her body tighten. "With you tonight?"

"You could fly back in the morning, if you have to."

"Henry, do you want me to come?"

He said, planning quickly. "I have a compartment. I can get another ticket on the train. Nobody would know a thing about it——"

She changed. Something happened to what he knew had been compliance. She stood there, thinking or feeling——

"Somebody might," she said, "somebody might see us together."

"I don't care," said Henry. He meant it to be truth.

"Yes, you do," she said, "you would. That's the trouble,

Henry." Her breath lifted, not quite a sigh, "like last night. You'll be glad tomorrow if I don't come tonight."

"No—I love you, Linda——"

"Of course you do—and I love you. I had to come to the station, Henry. I couldn't let you go off alone—like a man who isn't loved. Like a man who isn't going to be missed every minute."

"I'll be back in a day or two, darling. This job won't take long."

"Good——"

"I'll call you in the morning first thing——" he knew now she wasn't coming. And once when he had picked up a girl on the train—porters and conductors pretended not to notice——

"I want you with me," he said desperately.

"While I was waiting," Belinda told him, "I was pretending. That we were going away together. Not on a business trip to Washington but to the South. Down to the mountains. I was imagining looking out the window of the train tomorrow morning and seeing peach blossoms. And I planned what we would have for breakfast on the train—a big Southern breakfast with sausage and hominy grits."

"I swear we'll do that one of these days."

"Number 72. The Locust for Baltimore, Washington——"

"That's your train, Henry, isn't it?"

"I guess so, Belinda?"

"I'll just walk to the gate with you," she said.

CHAPTER TEN

JULIA ROOD'S secretary brought a stack of mail into the room in the House Office Building where the Congresswoman was at her desk, working on a draft of some remarks she intended to make on the floor of the House later in the day.

"There's nothing of much importance here," she said, "wouldn't it be better if I weeded out the freak stuff, Mrs. Rood?"

"No, I'd better look all of it over. Freak or not, it gives me an idea of what people have on their minds. You mustn't coddle me, Sue."

As she smiled up at her secretary, she thought the girl's face seemed worried. Or was she embarrassed? A chill crept into Julia's mind. She kept on with what she was doing until the secretary had left the room. Then she pulled the mail towards her.

Most of it fell into the usual categories of political correspondence. Appeals for sponsorship, invitations to make speeches, letters from people who had plans, dreams and whims which they wanted made into law—ah, here was the thing that had made Sue Finerman look so queer. It had been mailed from Chicago but bore no return address. Nor any signature. It was a newspaper clipping of a syndicated story

that had recently been printed about Julia Rood's achievements. Many newspapers had carried it and she was familiar with its substance. "*This handsome Congresswoman whose youthful looks belie her fortyish years, thirteen of which have been given in large part to her work in Congress, has made a humanitarian record of which American women are proud. Always a champion of young people, she has recently authored a bill whose purpose is to appropriate money for a study of the causes and cures of juvenile delinquency.*" In block letters on the side of the column was written, "She is also the mother of a girl who is the mistress of a married man whose wife has been driven into melancholia by the affair. People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. Clean up the delinquency in your own family!"

It's undoubtedly from the same person who wrote to me this way before, thought Julia. The same malignant devil and he—no, almost certainly it's a woman—is at her dirty work again. The person who cut out that column and wrote that slanderous insult is poisonous. Or crazy. Don't let it get on your nerves. Put it in the file with other freak letters—forget it—no anonymous letter is worth noticing. You couldn't answer it if you wanted to, and it probably couldn't be traced.

Mechanically she drew the pages of her notes close again as if they were protective. But she could not concentrate on them now. It isn't true, she told herself. Belinda surely hasn't gone that far. She must have been terribly indiscreet—she's so ingenuous, she's such a child in some ways. She never has realized that we're conspicuous, what it means to be in public life as I am. But she knows right from wrong. I brought her up to know that. She wouldn't be anyone's mistress! She's been infatuated with that man—I could tell that when I tried to talk to her about him. I warned her that any kind of friendship with a married man was misunderstood, that it could be disastrous. I told her that she could be sued for alienation of affection. Suppose it happens? And his wife is an invalid. Everybody's sympathy would be with her. It

would ruin me too. I couldn't face the public and have that flung in my face. If this thing ever broke in the newspapers—the thought made Julia Rood set her teeth. Again she reached for the newspaper clipping and looked at its date.

It was cut from a newspaper published in Chicago more than a week ago. So it had been printed before she had seen Clare in New York and begged her to do something to stop this affair between Belinda and Henry Cowper. Surely by this time she had taken a hand in it. Clare knows I'm counting on her, Julia Rood said to herself. And Clare, of all people, knows what gossip is. She lived with it long enough. She must remember.

After she married Jerome the talk died down because he was so important and she was so attractive. And they entertained beautifully. But there was a long time before that. I can remember things. I never told anyone about them except Paul. I told him everything. But even Paul didn't seem to understand why I felt the way I did. I can remember that all he said was that they must have loved each other very much.

Of course they loved each other. I know that when I was hardly more than a child. It bothered me all the time I was growing up, all those years while Clare was dashing back and forth between New York and St. Ives. She wasn't home except for a few days at a time. After Aunt Elise married, Martha ran the house and took care of me. I loved old Martha. But she was a paid housekeeper and we didn't live normally, the way other people did. And the mothers of the other girls would say to me, "Your mother isn't home very much, is she dear?" or "What very interesting work your mother does." Things like that, and they meant more than the words.

I used to be embarrassed because Jerome came to our house so much. He wasn't a relative and I couldn't explain him. Then someone told me he had a sick wife, perhaps Clare herself told me. And now another sick wife! Do I have to go

through it all over again with Belinda! It came out all right for Clare but Belinda will wreck herself unless she breaks this off. She'll wreck both of us. Clare must make her realize that.

I know—I knew even at the time—that Clare was unhappy. There was that night when I came back early from the skating rink and they didn't know I was in the house. Clare and Jerome were in the living-room and I heard Clare say, almost screaming, "But I can't endure it any longer!" and Jerome said that he knew it wasn't fair to her, that he wouldn't come to the house any more. They never knew I heard them. I was delighted that he said he would stay away from our house until I heard Clare crying. That was the only time I ever heard Clare cry.

He didn't stop coming. Julia thought, but of course you couldn't help liking Jerome. He was always kind to me. He was a man of high calibre. Not like this other wretch. If Henry Cowper hadn't made his wife repeatedly pregnant she wouldn't be in the condition she is in today. Then he chases after an innocent girl, involves her in a scandal——

She sat back, abandoning the notes for her speech. Her eyes went to the pictures across the desk in a three-fold silver frame. A profile of a thin, rather ascetic young man, the same man in military uniform looking reluctant at having his picture taken and yet trying to smile, and, between the two pictures of Paul Rood, a photograph of the girl Belinda had been at sixteen, mysterious and lovely.

She can be so sweet, thought her mother painfully. When we were together she would always do little things for me if she thought I was tired. Nobody else seems to think I ever do get tired. Belinda would bring me a hot-water bottle or something to drink. And when I had that virus pneumonia she wouldn't go back to school until I was well. She sat there in my room in the hospital and read to me. Sometimes her voice is so like Paul's, not so low-pitched but musical without singing.

I wanted to keep her with me all the time but I couldn't

manage it during those first years down here when I was learning the ropes. She would have been alone too much. Perhaps she went away to school too young and that's why she tired of it and didn't finish college. I've always tried to give her every advantage. I took her to interesting places during the holidays and tried to give her the broad outlook that everyone needs today. This dreadful business would never have happened if she had stayed with me in Washington instead of getting that job in New York.

Clare will know how to break it up. Belinda will listen to her. Clare has always had influence with Belinda. I suppose it's because she seems so glamorous to the child. Though the thought was slightly bitter, it helped to kill the taste of fear. Clare can always make people do what she wants, thought her daughter. I don't know how she does it.

She decided, I won't try to speak on the floor this afternoon. I don't feel like it and it's premature. Before I do, I should have another sponsor lined up in the Senate for the bill. It should be John Hume. I haven't asked him because he has been rather standoffish lately. Can it possibly be—it could be on account of this gossip about Belinda. He may have heard something. He's related to the man's wife. It's John Hume's fault for bringing Henry Cowper to my apartment in the first place. Why was I fool enough to suggest that he look up Belinda!

Sue Fineman put her head in the door and Julia busied herself.

"Shall I go to lunch now, Mrs. Rood?"

"Yes—go along. Is it that late? I must go myself. I'm having lunch in the Senate dining-room, meeting some people there. Oh, Sue, I ran through the mail. There's nothing you can't take care of. I see the lunatics aren't all dead yet."

When Sue had left, Julia Rood glanced at herself in the mirror and put on fresh lipstick. Her mouth was never too vivid but it was never pale. She went from her office through the long familiar corridors, smiling at some of the attendants

who were old friends, looking pleasant as she passed tourists who might recognize her from her thousands of pictures in the press. Then, as she approached the entrance to the Senate dining-room, her heart quickened. Senator John Hume was coming from the other direction with his unmistakable dignity. His hair was always a little too long, his expression one of classic thoughtfulness. It was not John Hume but his companion who startled Mrs. Rood. She recognized Henry Cowper at the same moment that Senator Hume was aware of her. He bowed slightly in his grand manner. It would have been natural to stop and greet the men but Julia did not do so. Unsmilingly she spoke to the Senator and she did not seem to recognize Henry at all, but quickly passed them by.

The Senator looked after her. He said, "Suppose we postpone lunch, Henry. Let us go back to my office where we can talk without interruption."

"I don't want you to go without your lunch on my account."

"There are times when food loses its flavour," said the Senator and grimly preceded Henry.

He seated himself behind his desk in a judicial manner and took his time.

"I am not sorry that you dropped in to see me today, Henry. I have been contemplating the necessity of an interview with you."

"I didn't expect to be here until later in the week. But yesterday at the board of directors' meeting of Victor we came to the conclusion that we should try to cut some of the red tape and get on to an operational status. Last night I talked with General Apps. He thought you might help us. You've been so kind before." ^ ;

"Yes?"

It was difficult. Henry had been shaken by the sight of Julia Rood and he wasn't sure whether she had recognized him or not. When he had looked up the Senator this morning his reception had been cool. He'd been kept waiting but the

Senator had asked him to lunch and then abruptly decided against it, and brought him back here. This meant trouble but he must not admit that it did. Not yet.

"We are convinced that we have something to offer that is highly practical," Henry went on.

"Let us talk about that later. Perhaps. How is Sylvia?"

"As you know, she's not at all well," said Henry stiffly. "We've had consultations with the best medical men available and they all agree that it's a condition that calls for quiet and nursing care. She has someone with her around the clock now."

"Poor child," said the Senator. "I had a letter from my sister Isabel telling me something about it. She had been to visit Sylvia."

"That was very kind."

"I am sorry to say that my sister was greatly upset by that visit. It was in fact her reason for writing me. She feels that Sylvia is mentally disturbed."

"She is, sir. She hasn't been herself for more than a year."

"Ah," said the Senator, "that is sad. I hope you have personally tried to restore her to hope and confidence."

"I've done all I can."

"There seems to be some doubt of that," said the Senator.

"I don't know what you mean, sir."

"I think you do," said Senator Hume. "In case you choose to be oblivious to gossip, Mrs. Rood's treatment of you at the door of the restaurant a few minutes ago must have made her feeling clear. You have been seeing a great deal of her daughter in New York?"

"Now and then," said Henry, tightening up rather belligerently. This was his own business.

"I'm not going to mince my words," said the Senator, "I'm not going to beat around the bush. There is a certain type of scandal which has never affected my family and Sylvia—your wife—is a member of my family. I might add that I have always had a great deal of respect and admiration for

Mrs. Rood. I have been greatly displeased and embarrassed to hear that you have—shall we say formed an attachment which can not be regarded as either wise or propitious for Mrs. Rood's daughter. I don't like what I hear, Henry."

"I don't know what you have heard, Senator Hume."

"My sister writes that it is common knowledge. She says that you've been observed in the company of this young girl in public places, that you communicate with her constantly by telephone, frequent her apartment——"

"Who says all that?"

"I understand that it is common gossip in your Chicago office."

"I know who's responsible—there is one salesman of the cheapest type——"

"It doesn't matter. Defaming him doesn't change facts, Henry. Is it true or not? Have you an attachment for this girl?"

"I—yes, I like Belinda Rood very much. I admire her. I respect her in every way. She is a person of great character, and——"

"I'm glad to hear it. That should make it much easier to set the situation right," said the Senator.

Henry looked at him and now the Senator's voice was harsh as he came to the climax of his talk.

"You must stop seeing this young woman, Henry."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I think that is my personal business."

"You are a married man."

"Technically," said Henry with bitterness, "I have done everything I can for Sylvia."

"For better or for worse," the Senator reminded him, "in sickness and in health."

Henry lit a cigarette. He was afraid of what he might say now.

"We are all human," said the older man. "You have my sympathy in many ways, Henry. There are certain lines of conduct that might be overlooked under the circumstances if you could thereby gain temporary pleasure or pseudo-happi-

ness. But this situation in which you place yourself is in a different category."

"It is completely different," said Henry. "I can't explain it. I don't want to talk further about it."

"I fear we must," answered the Senator. "This girl is young. Beloved by her family, from what her mother tells me. From the way she speaks of her. I met her once or twice and my impression was very favourable."

To have her discussed like this—oh Belinda——

"Because of her standing and her mother's public position this could have the most serious consequences. Mrs. Rood has stood very high in public opinion. Have you considered what scandal might do to her?"

"Belinda is not a child. She lives quite independently of her mother."

"That is a bold and inaccurate statement," said the Senator. "However, Henry, I am going to make myself clear. I cannot command you. I can advise you in as friendly a way as possible to give up this girl. For her mother's sake. For her own sake, for she can only be harmed by the association, whatever it may be. And for your own sake too. If you do not give up the affair, I cannot continue to act as your friend and in some measure as your sponsor with the government agencies. In fact, I will not. I might even use such influence as I have against you. And if by chance Mr. Yost should inquire into my reasons for such action I can only say frankly that I do not trust your judgment nor can I rely on your stability."

"You have no right to confuse the issues, sir," said Henry. "One is a personal matter. The other affects an industry that has a great deal to offer. It affects national defence, in which you are primarily interested."

"I believe I could continue to be useful to the defence of my country even if you were not in the picture, Henry."

"So you plan to squeeze me out?"

"I'd rather not see that happen," said the Senator, mild

again the way of a lawyer who could make a weapon of conciliation, "I've always liked you very much, Henry."

"At the moment that doesn't seem obvious," said Henry grimly.

"You may realize it more when you come to think the matter through. As I hope you will. Suppose you give it a few hours' thought—perhaps the balance of the afternoon to weigh the issues. If you should call on me tomorrow morning—by ten o'clock, if you like, I'm an early riser—and wish to talk about the business matters which bring you to Washington, I shall be glad to be of any assistance within my power. You might like me to accompany you in making a few calls to the Pentagon or elsewhere. But if you do call me, Henry, I shall take it for granted that you are going to put your life in order immediately. Otherwise—don't come back to this office."

"That's your ultimatum, Senator? "

"You use a harsh word. Perhaps it fits. An offer, in any case. A friendly and, I think, a generous one."

Henry sat silent for a few minutes. Then he said, "I suppose you have taken into consideration the fact that if I can't do business here, if I can't be useful to Victor, and if I'm going to be blocked at every turn now and in the future, I'll lose my job. That would be something of a catastrophe as far as Sylvia is concerned. I have to keep up a very expensive establishment now because she is so helpless—because she needs watching, to be frank. But I've been able to give her the care she needs because my usefulness to Victor has increased, in their opinion anyhow. She is the one who would pay for this. Have you thought of that aspect? "

"That's all very true. But several wrongs never made a right, Henry. I think we've said all that needs to be said on the subject. The decision is now yours."

"I agree," said Henry coldly. He stood up, his eyes remote, not seeming to regard the Senator or anything else within his sight.

"I'll save the time for you," said the Senator, "in case you come in tomorrow morning."

Henry walked the streets of Washington. He headed away from the Hill and passed the hotel where he had left his luggage without entering it. His direction was heedless and he walked fast. What he wanted immediately was distance and solitude. He had never known such anger and humiliation as drove him now. Never, even in the first days when he had to face Sylvia's collapse for what it was, had he felt so trapped. He was stripped of dignity, outraged by the intrusion into his private life and the exposure of what a decent man had a right to keep secret.

The afternoon was bleak and raw. Everything about it was unfriendly, from the scowling clouds bunched in the sky to the sharp cut of the wind. Walking brought no warmth into his body but Henry had to keep on. He could not sit in some hotel room or club lounge and figure out these issues. There was nothing to be considered thoughtfully or judiciously. It was obvious what would happen if he defied the Senator and yet every instinct in him cried out to do it.

Even in his times of worst worry he had never felt an outcast. He was a man who had place, and he liked and had often been comforted by his sense of place. Now it seemed cut out from under him. He felt a pariah as he tramped on. Instinctively he did not let himself think of Belinda or remember the sweet comfort and happiness of being with her. That was destroyed and he would not look at the wreckage. Anger was the only outlet he allowed himself at first, fury at the interference of these people who dared to dictate his personal life. His flesh crawled as he thought of what the discussions about him might have been, of what the men in his own office and plant in Chicago had been saying behind his back. Though he had suspected gossip even before Clare Tarrant told him of that letter to Belinda's mother, he had never thought that

he would have to face it in his business. He had tried to think that it was a marginal, unimportant thing that could be ignored. He had been determined to believe that.

Desperately he planned alternatives to concession. He would go to the Pentagon without Hume—that was what he would do. He would find the right people, convince them, get the contracts—but would he? Nothing would be done without the knowledge of the Armed Services Committee. And Victor would need those government contracts if it was going to expand. Mr. Yost had laid that on the line yesterday.

Yost was another pious, holier-than-thou old man, thought Henry. If this got to him, especially if it affected business, Yost would go right up in smoke. He probably would anyway. Yost was old-fashioned and sentimental and he doted on that wife of his. "We have to be patient with these things." Sure, his wife was crippled up a little with arthritis but Yost didn't know what it was like to live under the same roof with a woman whose mind didn't track. Old Yost loved to brag about how his wife had stood by him when the going was hard. He was talking about that last night at dinner. But Sylvia never had stood by. I never let her down, thought Henry bitterly. I pretended for a hell of a long time. But I never knew much about women. I thought they all acted like that. Until I found Belinda.

Did Belinda know this was coming? She was different the other night.

Other men cut loose. They break away from intolerable situations. I believe she would come with me. We could leave the country. But I'd run out of money before too long. There's got to be money. Hume knows that. It's what gives him the whip hand. If I had a lot of capital and could settle enough on Sylvia to take care of her and run with the rest, it would be different.

I can get a job with another company and tell the Senator to go to hell. I know this business from the ground up. I can go over to one of our competitors—Sheldon was talking about Columbia Dynamics. I'd take a lot of know-how with

me. Mr. Yost wouldn't like that very much. Let him try to find a man to take my place, to give his company all he has, the way I've been doing for years. For a minute Henry saw another man at his desk, a faceless man giving orders, sitting beside Mr. Yost at meetings. He hated the interloper. Anyway it wouldn't work, he said to himself bleakly. This kind of story spreads. And the Senator would be an enemy. He doesn't have to run for office for more than two years.

He was in an unfamiliar part of the city, a cheap section. There were no shining white public buildings here but instead little laundries, cut-rate drug stores, a pawnbroker's shop. Henry's thoughts were swinging around queerly and he realized that he was exhausted and hungry. I need a drink, he thought. No, I don't want a drink just now. I have to be clear as a bell. I haven't got to the point where I need the bottle. Coffee might help. He looked around and saw a narrow restaurant advertising hamburgers in white scrawls on its single window. Henry went in, sat at the counter and asked for coffee.

"And what else?"

"A hamburger, I guess." He remembered he'd had no lunch.

"With or without onions?"

Henry knew then that he was distracted because it was difficult to decide even that.

"No onions," he said so positively that the waitress looked at him again.

But two cups of coffee cleared his head and being off his feet helped too. He looked at his watch because that clock over the counter couldn't be right. But it was. It was a quarter to five and beginning to get dark outside. He would have to go back to the hotel. This made no sense. There was nothing to do but go back. He remembered with pain that he had told Belinda that he would telephone her as soon as he found out how long the business here would take, let her know when he would be back in New York so they could make plans. There couldn't be any more plans unless—how

can I tell her about this blackmail? Tell her what the Senator said about her mother, tell her that they've cut the ground from under us and cut the heart out of me. And Belinda—have I done you harm? God, if I could stand with you before the world—but I can't take care of you. It's more impossible than it was before. I have to fade out completely.

Her grandmother warned me. She's a wise old girl. But she was decent. She didn't threaten or do any moralizing. She said she was glad I'd had a glimpse—what a glimpse of heaven it has been. When Linda met me in the station last night she was just like a wife, a dear wife seeing me off, I loved her more than ever before. I didn't think it could be more but it always would have been. Better and better. Lucky she didn't come with me. That could have been crazy. I don't know. We would have had that to remember. No, no. She's safe anyway. No one has anything sound to go on. I wish I could talk to Mrs. Tarrant and ask her to do just one thing—never to let Belinda know there were any letters about us. Belinda always said she didn't mind. She thought I was too sensitive. She thought I was embarrassed. As when Bob Sheldon butted in the other night. All that bothered me was never being able to take care of her.

Try to look at it straight. He was in the streets again, less confused, less angry, but even more desolate. He thought, suppose this happened to someone else. Suppose you knew a married man who couldn't get a divorce and he fell in love with a beautiful, decent girl—what's the answer? You might be sorry for him but you wouldn't go out of your way to do anything about it. You couldn't do anything about it. He'd be up against the law and he'd have to obey the law, or cheat with the chance of being caught and hurting the girl, or he could take her and run for it. If he had the money.

If anyone looks askance at me, I'll knock him down. I'll knock down Bob Sheldon if he ever mentions her name again. And one thing I will do. I'll get that skunk, Peters, in the Chicago office, fired. He's the one who started the talk after he saw me with Belinda. It must have been him. They've all

been pussy-footing around, talking behind my back out there. Maybe even that nurse of Sylvia's—I had an idea that she was hinting at something. I'll fire her too—no, I won't fire anybody. What's the use? It's all over the dam now.

Get back on the job. Rub your nose in your work. You aren't supposed to be a human being. Of course it's all right if you run around to a whorehouse now and then—that's what the holy old Senator suggested—I'm sure he knows his way about. But you mustn't love a sweet, wonderful girl—who loves you. You might hurt her ambitious mother politically. You can't hold your job unless you give up the only person in the world who makes it worth living. Oh, Linda, I don't care what happens to anyone else, least of all to me, if you're all right, if you're safe.

A very tall Negro with a sad, aristocratic face was waiting at a bus stop. He looked familiar to Henry. Where have I seen him, Henry wondered. He nodded, answering the glint of recognition in the Negro's eyes. He was wearing a shabby coat and a worn hat but Henry suddenly remembered him in an immaculate white jacket. He was a waiter at the Mayflower, going on duty. No matter where you are, you always run into somebody who links you with the life you have to lead, thought Henry.

It was a link. He had to go back. Henry hailed a stray taxi and told the driver to take him to the Mayflower. He was becoming clear and cold and deeply bitter. There was no alternative. He had nothing to offer Belinda except disgrace. I have no choice, he told himself definitely, as if he were passing sentence on his life.

He made his desolate plan. I won't go back to New York when I finish here. There's nothing to go for now. If I put the deal over—and damn the Senator, he'd better deliver for us—I can report to Mr. Yost on the telephone. Then I'll call Belinda and say it's necessary for me to go back to Chicago. Nothing more than that. I won't tell her what's gone on here. I can spare her that much. What will she think? I'll have to say that I don't know when I'll be in New York

next time. Will she believe that I've changed, that I care less for her for some reason? It will hurt her. It's cruel and vicious. But if I see her, if I so much as touch her again, I can't go through with this. Will she realize that they have me trapped, that the only way I can give her protection is by letting her go? She expects me back and I'm not going. Does she expect me? Perhaps she knew the other night when she said good-bye, knew then that they'd slaughter the little we had.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PHILIP MERTON had come to call on Clare promptly, possibly because he felt that he had been inadequate when she telephoned to say that she was in New York, or more probably because he wanted to see what widowhood had done to her before making any plans for entertaining her. He was reassured, as Claude Gregory had been, though Merton was not so frank in telling her so. But Clare could sense his approval. He had not been with her for half an hour before he began to plan a dinner party in her honour.

In his stylized way, Philip Merton was very social. He was a city gentleman who had long since discarded the coarser and more showy pleasures of the metropolis. A lawyer in a firm which dealt more with litigations over money than any other human problem, he had built up a large acquaintance with fortunes, their intermarriages and the intricate disposal of them. He owned a house in East Sixty-seventh Street where he lived in a wealthy, selective way. His wife had died so long ago that Clare had known Merton only as unmarried. His long-time servants were his family.

Nature had meant him to be a plump man, and his doctor and his tailor both worked against that so his body looked deflated. But his manners had such a sheen that the shape which enclosed them hardly mattered. As she thought that

now, Clare remembered that she had said something like it to Jerome after she met Philip Merton for the first time. She and Jerome often compared notes about their friends' characters and habits and could enjoy disagreement. Jerome Tarrant's friendship with Merton dated back to the time before he and Clare were married. It had been an outgrowth of legal advice given to the Charters Electric Corporation when Jerome had been its president. It had been cemented by a well-matched ability at gin rummy, like tastes in politics and Scotch whisky, and the respect which each man had for the well-earned personal success of the other.

"Phil is good company," Jerome would say.

And, now that she saw him again, Clare remembered that she had always had her reservations. She'd told Jerome once that Philip Merton's life seemed like an artificial arrangement, not a natural function. She had said, "an arrangement in the very best taste, of course."

After that, between themselves, they often called him "arrangement-Phil". That was why she remembered it so distinctly now. She recalled too that she had been honest about something else in regard to Merton. She told Jerome, "Your friend gives me an inferiority complex and nothing enrages me more. He can make me feel like the goose-girl. I never knew men like him before I married you. My life in New York while I was working was not a very mannered affair, not social in his sense at all."

But it was good to have Philip Merton sitting here today. Clare had not felt like a goose-girl for a long time. She didn't now. She was a little amused at the way her caller was warming up to genuine cordiality. He saw she was established here like a woman who was well provided for. She had no intention of weeping on his shoulder.

"You will come to dine with me very soon, my dear?"

"I would love it. Do you still have that wonderful cook?"

"I have indeed. But I lost Otto. He was the butler I had for so long, you remember. A wretched motor accident. He was moving us back from Easthampton and his car was hit

by one of those disorderly, misnamed station wagons, all piled up with children—Otto was in no way to blame. It was instant, I am glad to say. I would not have liked to have Otto suffer. He always kept me in such comfort. I grieved for poor Otto.”

Otto was part of the arrangement, thought Clare. But Phil did grieve. I can hear it in his voice. I wonder what happened to the children in the station wagon.

“You must tell me who else you would like me to invite to dine with you, Clare.”

“Anyone. No one, unless you want to.”

“Just a few. Not more than twelve—I don’t have more than twelve dining-room chairs and it sets a happy limit. How about the Prentices? They were so fond of you both.”

Not particularly fond of me, thought Clare. She said that would be fine.

“And do you know Leila Grayson? She was a McCormac. She and her new husband are here. Just temporarily. They expect to live in Paris. She has a lovely house there and a very good entourage. I want to have them to dine before they leave. You’ve met Leila?”

“No, but I know who she is.”

“You’ll like her. She’s very bright. Keen on French politics and knows the situation. And who else? Whom have you been seeing since you’ve been here?”

“Hardly anyone. I’ve only been here a few days. My old business partner, Claude Gregory—I don’t think you know him. I’m lunching with Lee Havighurst tomorrow. And of course my granddaughter, Belinda, who’s working here on a magazine.”

“I know Lee Havighurst. His second wife was a Prindle. I see him at the club and here and there. I think I’ll ask him. Brilliant fellow. Not that I read what he writes.”

“That creates a problem,” said Clare, but Philip was busy with plans and didn’t ask about the problem.

“Would you like me to include your granddaughter?”

The fear that Philip Merton’s call had crowded out for a

few minutes swept over Clare again. It had begun when Julia telephoned yesterday from Washington to say that she had received another of those anonymous things, worse than the first, and that she had seen Henry Cowper in Washington and cut him dead. Julia had begged her to tell Belinda that she must never see that man again. She had almost demanded it and Julia usually handled things for herself so capably. She had said—"For my sake, Clare, for Belinda's sake, can't you get her interested in someone else! You know so many people."

But the only way I could find out what Henry Cowper was like, and see how far it had gone, was to have them here that night, thought Clare.

She said to Philip, "Belinda's very young."

"I often ignore age brackets," said Philip. "A few young people give a dinner party a fresh flavour. And I find they enjoy it. I could ask the young Howards too. I've been intending to entertain them. They are in their late twenties and we are taking Howard into the firm. As an apprentice of course. She was a Hall from Baltimore. How old is your granddaughter?"

"Twenty-two. Incredibly."

"And does she take after you? Is she a beauty too?"

"Belinda's really rather lovely looking. But I don't know what her engagements are."

Clare thought, Linda wouldn't want to come to his dinner. That sort of thing isn't up her street at all.

"I must meet her," said Philip, "do try to bring her. Now when shall we say? Would next Saturday be possible for you? I have to go to Boston on Monday. I don't know that I can get the Prentices on such short notice but if not, there are always others."

"Saturday is perfect for me," said Clare.

"And if in the meantime I can be of any service to you, Clare, you must let me know. I was deeply attached to Jerome."

"He was fond of you, Phil. I might like, one day, to ask for a little professional advice. As a client, I mean."

"My advice is at your disposal in any capacity."

"It's about Jerome's estate. What he left me."

"Is it in trust?"

"No—he didn't see any reason for a trust. He thought I could manage things myself with the help of his lawyer. Of course a good deal of Jerome's income died with him. But there's plenty for my needs and comfort."

His face did not change but Clare knew that statement would bring relief to Merton.

"Jerome was a very sound man."

Clare said, "I would like to work out a plan to help my daughter financially—she's in Congress, you know."

"I know that. She must be very clever. I often see her name in the press."

"Also I want to give Belinda a small income now and the balance of my estate when I die. I haven't been clear as to what will be the best way. And the problem is that the lawyer in St. Ives whom Jerome trusted so much is not well and has gone to Santa Barbara. There are other lawyers who could do what I want—if I knew what it was. On that I'd like your advice."

"I'll be glad to talk it over at any time."

"I'll be so grateful," said Clare. "There's no hurry, of course. I'll be here for weeks, perhaps even months. Excuse me one minute, Phil. There's someone at the door."

Clare went through the foyer and opened her door to the complete surprise of seeing Belinda there.

"How nice—this is lucky, Belinda——"

"Do you mind?" asked Belinda. Then she saw Merton's coat and hat on the hall bench and said quickly, "Oh, you've company. I won't stay now."

"But you must. This is someone who wants to meet you. He's just been inviting you to dinner, as a matter of fact."

"Who?" A flash of excited hope came into Belinda's eyes and died out as Clare said, "Philip Merton. An old friend of Jerome's."

She drew the girl into the living-room, thinking she was right about Belinda's beauty. It didn't matter what she wore. Today it was a green tweed suit with a yellow scarf twisted at her neck. She seemed keyed up and that was becoming too. She might have been running to get that natural colour in her cheeks—or was it from a drink?

"Phil, here's Belinda dropping in just when I wanted to show her to you."

"I'm so delighted that I lingered." Merton's connoisseur's eyes went over the girl and were pleased. He didn't hesitate. "I've just been telling Clare, whom I will not call your grandmother when she looks as she does, that she must bring you to dine with me. I've a funny old house, with a funny old cook——"

"It's all fabulous," said Clare, smiling. "Phil is an education in living in New York. A course you haven't taken, Linda."

"I would love to come," said Belinda.

Her manner now was as much a surprise to Clare as her appearance at the door. Belinda did not sound like herself. She might be any well-mannered *débutante*, socially docile and confident.

"And I shall have to find a young man for you. Unless you prefer to supply one. Is there a special young man?" asked Merton.

She mustn't suggest bringing Henry Cowper. I couldn't let her do that, thought Clare with apprehension.

"That depends," said Linda. "When am I invited to dinner?"

"Next Saturday. At eight, Clare?"

"It just happens that a man I know——" Clare shuddered inwardly, she must stop this. Then she heard Belinda going on pleasantly, "He's in the service and he'll have a week-end leave. But please don't include us unless——"

"Is that the same young man Jerome and I met and liked?" asked Clare.

"Peter Sulgrave," said Belinda, sounding like someone else.

"I know quite a few Sulgraves," said Merton. "Is he from New Haven or Philadelphia?"

"I think it's New Haven."

"Why not bring your warrior? At least for dinner. And I always understand when young people have to leave early."

"You sound like the most wonderful host," said the strange Belinda, "we'd love to come—if you really wouldn't mind if we did have to dash off."

But when Clare had closed the door on Merton and returned to the living-room, she saw the girl who had been there with Henry Cowper. Belinda was standing by the window in the very place where she had stood with him. She's re-creating it. She's came back for something, thought Clare.

"Thank you for letting us come the other night, Clare," said Belinda without turning.

"You've always been my favourite guest, you know," said Clare, "ever since you were a little thing. Jerome's favourite one, too."

"I loved to stay in your house. There was so much light and colour. Your house knew how to live so well, Clare. What have you done with it?"

"Locked it up," said Clare. "Of course they all tell me I should sell it."

"Should you? Why?"

"Widows used to get themselves to nunneries," said Clare, "now they're supposed to get to apartments. It's a big house. It had to be. Jerome was a big man."

"You're tall too," said Belinda. "I remember that Jerome called the house Clare's citadel."

Clare laughed aloud. The sudden memory was delicious. "He did, didn't he? And there was a reason. He knew I never felt safe until I married him."

"The other night I tried to tell Henry how happy you were," said Belinda.

"I liked your Henry." Dear God, that was exactly what she should not have said.

"Not mine," said Belinda.

"I didn't mean that," said Clare, trying a useless laugh, "it's just my way of identifying people with the ones who bring them around." She went on hurriedly. "He seems very intelligent. Quite charming. I can see why you enjoy his company."

There was no answer. Her words fell short of the girl's absorption. Clare told herself, you can't dodge this any longer. You mustn't let Belinda believe that because you had a meal with her and Henry Cowper you are willing to be an accomplice in this affair. Speak up—tell her how you feel.

"But it's not particularly wise, is it, Linda? Isn't it futile? From what I've heard of his situation—and Henry told me the same thing when you were out of the room—he can't get a divorce. Isn't that true?"

"Yes."

"It's a dead-end relationship. It can't lead to marriage."

"It didn't have to lead to marriage."

"You think that now," said Clare gently. "At first it is always a brave adventure. Then the bitterness sets in."

"Bitterness would never set in," said Belinda.

"You don't know how it is, Linda. I'm not moralizing about this. I'm not talking about the right or wrong of the feeling you two have for each other. I know this happens to people, like a serious accident that they aren't at all to blame for. You've stumbled into the cruellest human relationship on earth. And the more decent the people involved are, the more cruel it is."

"That's true," said Belinda, "oh, you're right about that. It was why Henry suffered over things. He has to feel honourable to be happy. Even to be comfortable."

Like Jerome, thought Clare. An insinuating look from a porter or a waiter could make him squirm. It could infuriate him.

"The more decent, the more cruel," repeated Belinda. She was still watching the street below, now crawling with people and streaming with cars in the brilliant dusk. She said, "Every

kind of evil is down there now, going its way for the night. I know what goes on. I live here. I hear horrible things about the habits of people and I can reach out and touch some of them from my desk in the office. Almost all the novels that people want most to read play up illegal or vicious relationships—the plays and movies are just the same—the hotels are full of bitches—and tonight any number of girls are scraping up money for abortions—why in a city that takes all that for granted couldn't something happy and harmless be left alone? Just because he is a decent, good man? ”

“It's not harmless, Linda. Not for you. It's not what you should have.”

“All I ever wanted,” said Belinda, “was what belonged to us.”

They must have quarrelled, thought Clare. She sounds so despairing. She speaks as if it were past. There are always those terrible quarrels, those days when you think that this time it really is over.

“He's had so little happiness,” said Linda, “he hardly knew what it was like to be happy. He was learning—so was I——” She stopped, blocked by some prospect that defeated her.

“Henry is still in Washington? ”

“Yes.”

“I would like to see him again,” said Clare, “when is he coming back? ”

“He isn't coming back to New York from Washington. He's going out to Chicago. Where he lives.”

“But he said the other night——”

“His plans have changed,” said Linda, “I'm not going to see Henry any more. Not even when he comes again. I won't know if he comes again.”

If that's true, everything is all right. They've come to their senses, thought Clare. But the girl's voice and the sight of the bereft figure at the window sickened her.

“You've decided that's best? ”

"Henry decided it. Something happened in Washington. I don't know what it was—I can guess—somebody interfered, there was something cruel. It wasn't mother. I asked him that, but he said he hadn't talked to her. He said there was nothing else he could do. That was the night before last. He telephoned. He sounded dead. Not just tired or worried—I know his voice when he's that way—this was much worse. He said it was—better for me." Her voice mocked the last three words.

"He must love you very much, Linda."

"He does."

"It's a horrible shock—I know how hard it is—I'm so sorry——"

Linda said, "Do you know why I came here tonight? Because this was the place where we were really happy for the last time. He wasn't at all sure he ought to come—and then, when we got here, he loved it. It was wonderful, so family, and everything he liked—and you didn't make us feel that anything was wrong—until he had that last bit of talk with you——"

"You believe this was because of what I said to Henry?" Clare remembered that she had said he must break it off, if Belinda would not.

"Oh no. He told me you were kind. I really don't think it was because of what happened in Washington, whatever that was. It was something in himself——"

"I'm sure you're right. I was never perceptive enough to realize that about Jerome——"

She cut her words off. She was saying too much. But if Linda had heard, it meant nothing to her. She had room for no more than one thought now. For another moment she was silent and then said she must go.

"Have dinner with me," begged Clare, "we'll go over to the club. You won't have to talk."

"I can't. I have to get some work done. I've a deadline tomorrow for getting in the material on this abortion piece. It's scheduled. And yesterday I didn't work at all."

"How could you? Will you try to get some sleep when the work is done?"

"Oh yes." Linda, knotting the yellow scarf tighter, sounded now as she had when she was talking to Philip Merton. "Don't worry about me, Clare. I'll be seeing you soon."

"On Saturday night? Will you really come to Phil's dinner?"

"I rather liked him," said Belinda. "He certainly doesn't pretend to be anything but a snob. I'll come."

"Shall I pick you up or were you in earnest about bringing that young man?"

"I'll have to bring Pete if I come at all. I've a date with him. He called me last night." She met Clare's eyes. "It's not hard, he's so completely different. Henry thinks that I ought to go out with other men. He doesn't want me to be alone. He hates that most of all. So I promised that I wouldn't do anything crazy—that I'd take care of myself and try to be happy. I don't want Henry to worry about me. That's all I can do for him—all—well, it's Philip Merton, isn't it? Where does he live?"

"Sixty-first Street. He's listed in the telephone book."

"We'll be there at eight."

"And there's nothing I can do for you?"

Belinda hesitated. "There's mother," she said, "will you take care of that? She will be glad. But don't let her ever tell me so."

She has always been like this, Clare said to herself, thinking restlessly of Belinda after she had gone. She knew the core of the girl's character. Incidents drifted back to her now. Once when she was a very small child, her mother had left Belinda overnight in the Tarrant house and made her promise not to disturb anyone if she waked early. And, not waking early herself, Clare had been surprised at the silence of the house. She went to the door of the room they used as a nursery and heard the child, who must have been awake for an hour or more, crooning very softly to some absurd

stuffed animal she treasured, "We will not a-sturb anyone, no we won't," over and over again. Even then she kept a promise.

There was the dreadful day when the parakeet that Jerome had given Belinda for her birthday flew into the electric fan and was killed before the motor could be turned off. Belinda was nine or ten and staying again with Clare. Jerome was away on a business trip. Belinda couldn't keep her supper down that night and Clare knew she was suffering. She brought the little girl into her own bed and would have held her close. But Belinda did not want that. She had lain quietly on her own side of the bed. She was never a cuddly little girl. But she loved us, thought Clare. Jerome always kept that pasteboard heart she coloured with crayon and pinned on our door one Valentine's Day. She had printed on it, *I love you, Clare and Jerome.*

If he were alive, he could help Belinda so much now. She would trust his judgment, take his advice, I think. Of course he would feel the way I do about it. It's not being a hypocrite—it's because I know only too well what she would let herself in for and she's too young to be hurt and damaged.

That poor desolate Henry Cowper. He must be torn to pieces. Jerome used to try to let me go and then—I wonder if they will stick to his decision. I'll not say anything final to Julia just yet. When she calls I'll reassure her and tell her about Philip's dinner and the Sulgrave boy. And I shall make her promise absolutely not to say another word to Belinda about this affair. She might drive her only child out of her life completely. That was what Belinda meant when she said "she'll be glad—but don't let her tell me so". She doesn't want to stop loving Julia and she's afraid it might come to that.

It was not yet seven o'clock. There was so much time in the days. But nothing was continuous as it used to be when there was Jerome. Time now was a sea with little occupied islands here and there, and she floated from one to another—

her club tonight, lunch with Lee tomorrow, dinner at Phil's house on Saturday night. Clare was tempted to call room service and have them send up an omelette and not go out. She resisted herself. That was hiding. She must not be afraid to walk alone. But she would not go down to the hotel dining-room and sit at a corner table by herself, like, she said to herself, the other old women who sit alone in the best hotels all over the world.

Clare changed her make-up, considering her face without mercy in the bright mirror. Phil had been flattering her, of course. The outline was still there but the eyelids crumpled a little, her mouth seemed smaller—it had no anticipation. I'm well preserved, she thought ironically—it's one way of being a freak. I feel outcast, left behind. Of course she is wretched and suffering, but Belinda is just at the beginning of it now and she will be in it for years and years. And suddenly she wondered whether what she felt for Belinda was pity or jealousy. She hurried away from that thought and went out.

Her membership in the club where she went tonight had been a personal achievement, quite a feather in her cap nineteen years ago. She thought of that as she went through the dignified hall to leave her coat with the elderly reliable woman attendant in the cloakroom. I was handling Cecilia Warren's autobiography for serialization, and she was on the membership committee and got my name processed very quickly. It was hard to get in this club and is harder now. There's always a long waiting list. I was a member before Jerome and I were married. He liked my being elected. It proved that I wasn't a tramp. I was a lot more pleasant too than I pretended to be. This was always a good place to take authors for lunch, particularly men when I wanted to sign the cheque, for they couldn't be expected to pay for anything in a woman's club. After we were married we came here once in a while for a cocktail or dinner. Jerome used to say that the age level was a little too high in the members but just right in the liquor.

She took the elevator to the lounge where half a dozen groups were gathered over appetizers and drinks. There were women by themselves in several corners and here they did not look desolate. Clare picked up an evening paper from a table, asked a passing maid to bring her a Martini and found an armchair by a reading lamp for herself. Near by was a family party and she scanned it lightly. They were strangers to her, an elderly bald-headed man wearing a hearing aid, a woman in very smart black clothes who might be his daughter and a couple of handsome young people in their twenties. There was another woman with them but her back was towards Clare. Her wispy grey hair under a velvet turban showed that she was contemporary with the older man. She was probably his wife and the hostess.

"Yes, I certainly would like another," said the woman in black.

"You children too? You won't be able to taste your dinner," the older woman said in mild protest. But she beckoned to the maid and gave the order. As she turned her glance fell on Clare's lamplit face. It arrested her interest. She looked away, murmured something to the older man and then moved so that she could see Clare again.

Clare heard fragments of the talk but did not realize she had been noticed until the woman got off the deep sofa with some effort and came over to where she sat.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "but aren't you Clare Joyce?"

"Why—yes, I was." It was strange to be called by that name.

"I was sure you must be. I saw you and I couldn't believe it."

Clare was studying the stranger—trying to remember where—there was something vaguely familiar——

"I'm Jean Granger—Jean Humber now these many years——"

"Why, Jean! Of course—you were in the shadow—how wonderful to see you!" Clare made an instantaneous attempt

to cover up any dismay with genuine pleasure at this meeting. But Jean Granger had been beautiful—a Daisy Chain beauty at Vassar—and this woman who was well past middle age had a plain, lumpy face and no style—oh yes, it was Jean, she saw it now in the eyes and the way a smile lifted her upper lip.

"I did know you were a member of the Club," said Jean Humber, "because I saw your name on the list of candidates, where it always gives the maiden name too. That was years ago. But I asked once or twice at the desk and you never were here——"

"I haven't been living in New York for eighteen years."

"Come and meet my family, Clare. I'm sorry—I don't recall your married name."

"It's Tarrant now."

"Your husband's not with you?"

"No, he is dead," said Clare.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She said softly, "My daughter over there is a widow. Only last year. And those children are her son and his very new wife. Please come over. They'd love to meet you and so would my Jim."

The daughter smiled distantly. The two young people stood up correctly and looked a little amused as their grandmother introduced Mrs. Tarrant, "a girl who was in college with me—well, I suppose we're no longer quite girls, Clare! Though you've changed hardly at all."

Mr. Humber was cordial. It was obvious that whatever pleased his wife, as this meeting did, was good in his eyes too. Clare sat down so that he and the young people would not have to stand. She tried to share Jean Humber's delight in the unexpected encounter. But it gave her a shock. She could not feel like Jean's contemporary. The widowed daughter seemed more her own age and that, Clare knew, was ridiculous. Mrs. Drummond—Lucy they called her—must be in her early forties and she would be more interested in personal than family life. She feels the way I did when I lived here, before I met Jerome, thought Clare.

"Clare was a great radical," said Jean, "she was going to make the world over."

"Somebody's done it," said Mrs. Drummond, "was it you, Mrs. Tarrant?"

"I've only watched it happen, I'm afraid."

"That's the intelligent thing to do," said Mr. Humber. But his grandson smiled with irony at the usual philosophy of the old.

"Do you still write stories, Clare?"

"No.-But for years I made a living by selling what other people wrote."

"You mean you are a literary agent?" asked Lucy Drummond with sudden interest.

"Not now. I used to be."

"Did you ever happen to know Lee Havighurst?"

Lee has a finger in so many lives, thought Clare, and answered that she did, but did not mention tomorrow's luncheon engagement with him.

"We all knew you'd do something remarkable," said Jean Humber. "I married the same year that we graduated."

So had Clare, but there was no use in comparing experiences in that field.

"Can't you have dinner with us, Clare? Jim and I leave for Florida tomorrow and this may be our only chance for a gossip in a long while. Please do."

"I'm so sorry," said Clare, "but I just came in for a few minutes. I can't stay for dinner." She looked at her watch as if she had an engagement to keep and felt guilty at the lying gesture. But she could not face hours of reminiscence. Jean would ask so many questions. She would want to make a chain of all the events that had happened since they left college and join it to the present. There were too many broken links in Clare's life. And they would want to hear about Jerome and telling would hurt too much. The fundamental happiness and peace in Jean Humber's face gave Clare the outcast feeling again.

"Well, I'm certainly going to write to our class corre-

spondent and say that I've seen you and that you're better-looking than ever," declared Jean.

Clare laughed. She had never written to the class correspondent. She put Alumnae news in the wastebasket when it came to her desk. She couldn't remember most of the people who were mentioned.

"If I ever do write, I'll say that you're luckier than ever," she said, and kissed her friend. Then said good-bye quickly to the others.

She reclaimed her coat and went out into the street again. A new place for dinner would suit her better than the club after all. Walking over to Madison Avenue she went along briskly, looking for a restaurant. It was near theatre time now and there were few people on the sidewalks. Half a block ahead of her a woman who looked old went slowly along, leaning on a cane. Clare had almost overtaken her when the woman fell.

She ran forward to help, wondering if the old woman was drunk. But she was not. Nor was she very old. It was the cane that made her seem that way. Clare tried to help her up, lifting the arm which had broken the fall. But the woman was so heavy that it was impossible. A man passed, stopped uncertainly, looked at the woman on the sidewalk and then at Clare. He came to help her. Between them they lifted her up and steadied her with the walking stick. Clare stooped to brush off some dirt from the woman's coat. It was a good coat.

"Are you hurt anywhere?" asked Clare. "That was a bad fall."

"No, I'm quite all right. It was my own fault. It was such a nice night that I came out for a little walk. I should know better at my age. When you have arthritis and are nearly sixty you can't walk safely on these sidewalks. There are uneven places and you don't see them. There's a taxi. It's only a few blocks to my apartment but I won't take any more risks."

Clare flagged the cab and helped her inside.

"Well, I think you've done your good deed for the day," said the man who had helped lift the woman. He was still standing there, as if waiting.

"Poor thing," said Clare, "she'll be badly bruised."

"She said it. At her age she shouldn't be out on the streets. Which way are you going?"

"Not far," said Clare, "and alone."

"Oh, don't be like that," he said. He followed, as she walked on quickly to distance him. She wasn't afraid of the man. There was something else. She didn't want him to realize his mistake. And then, in fury at herself, she turned when she reached the street light at the corner and said, "Go away! I'm twice your age!"

He seemed to vanish and she found herself half laughing and yet trembling as she turned in under the marquee of a Longchamps restaurant. It was not crowded now and the captain, who stood among the tables, armed with a menu, looked at Clare carefully before he came forward. He did not welcome an unescorted woman with any warmth. Women alone were often more trouble than they were worth, especially if they had a drink or two before they came here.

Clare read his glance. She must get used to the reception that was given to a woman by herself in public places. If Jerome were here how the waiter would smile and fawn on him. Living with Jerome had softened her. I used to go around New York alone, she told herself. I had to.

"No, that table is too close to the kitchen," she said as the captain led her to an inconspicuous place and he thought better of her after that.

"Madame would like a cocktail?"

"Yes."

She drank it slowly and ordered another. This added up to three cocktails, for she had had one at the club—no, four, counting the one she had earlier with Philip Merton. The disconcerting things blurred a little now. She ordered a lamb chop and coffee. It was after nine when she had finished her dinner and too late to go to the theatre. There was a movie

house not far from the Waldorf. It would be better to go there than to return to her hotel so early.

The film was fantastic. She tried to tie her mind to it but her thoughts drifted. She tried to make a plan for Belinda, but no plan fitted the girl. She wondered what kind of house Jean Humber lived in and imagined its rich comfort. She would ask Lee Havighurst about Lucy—what was her last name? Anyway, he would know her as Lucy. It had been hysterical to yell at that man who was following her. Oh, Jerome, I do things so badly without you. This was where I came in. I'll walk back. The air will be good for me and thank God I won't need a cane. Not yet.

This was the time of night when she and Jerome would stop in for a drink after the theatre. There would be plenty of liquor in their hotel rooms, but Clare liked to see the drift of people in public places and Jerome always indulged her. They often chose the Chatham bar, the small room at the front, where there was nearly always someone Clare recognized, some writer or editor. Why don't I go in there now, she asked herself. They know me. It's only two blocks away.

She walked the blocks but, confronted with the familiar entrance, she found it difficult to go in and went past. No, she didn't want to. But she did. Suddenly retracing her steps, she opened the door. There were only a few people. That was the corner where they used to sit—before they were married and after. There was where we had some famous arguments, she thought.

"Good evening, madam! It is good to see you again, Mrs. Delchamp."

This was welcome indeed, from the same anxious-faced little bar waiter who had served her so often. He always called her Mrs. Delchamp, though he had seen her here with Jerome. He had never mastered the fact that she had married again. It didn't matter. She never corrected him.

"What will madam have? A Tom Collins?"

He even remembered that was her favourite drink late at night.

“Yes. Please, Benny.”

She had remembered his name, not at first, but now it came to her lips almost unconsciously. When she had been working in New York, when she had been Clare Delchamp, Benny must have served her hundreds of these tall sharp drinks. After Tony died, and Claude persuaded her not to sell the agency, there were all those years in New York.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE news of Tony Delchamp's death came to Clare with horror and astonishment. She was still in St. Ives with her two-months-old baby when she heard of it, and it made all the plans and intentions she had been working on quite useless. She had meant, of course, to go back to live with Tony when he returned from England. Since he was too far away to thwart her dreams with mockery or actuality, she had built up the hope of having a more normal domestic life, now that they were parents. They could move to a house in some healthy suburb. They would find a servant who would be competent and devoted to the baby. Their friends would soon beat a path to their new door. She would make Tony happy and keep him loyal. In her plan was generous forgiveness for any lapses from fidelity on his part, and a determination to be indispensable to him. But suddenly he was dead, and not as her mother had died after the preparation of ill-health and a great deal of living. Tony must have been taken completely by surprise. No one would expect death less than he—that was what Clare kept thinking in the first bewildered days.

Because of the war, the background of her personal loss was a general state of shock and excitement and the acceptance of multiple death. But the accident that killed Tony

had no fragrance of heroism. At first Clare heard only that he had received a bad fall and died of concussion. He was in Surrey when it happened and the man who was his host there—or covering up for his hostess—sent the first message. Later, piecing information together, Clare realized that there must have been some sort of brawl before the tragedy. It had happened in a public room at an inn and the place was full of soldiers who were returning to the front lines. When Tony was drunk, he could have infuriated some of them. But it was an accident, not murder. She saw a copy of the doctor's report.

Cables from England and telegrams from New York advised her that it would be unwise to bring the body back for burial, at least not until after the war. Tony had no immediate family, no cemetery lot, and Clare, who had to make the decision, could not imagine that his preference would be to lie beside her mother and father. Passage was difficult on the Atlantic, the baby was very young, and if Clare went to Great Britain there was a chance that she might not be able to get back for some time. She had to figure out what was best to do and it was necessary to consider costs. The few thousand dollars which would come to her from her mother's estate might be advanced or borrowed against but it was precious money, considering her responsibilities.

Perhaps too she was afraid that she might find out things in England that would obstruct decent sorrow. She sent word to his friends to bury Tony there and she promised herself to visit the place later. Clare treated herself impersonally and without self-pity in those days. She must not grieve past the point of control, for careful plans had to be made and the baby's schedule maintained. Obviously she would have to go back to New York and dispose of the household goods which belonged to Tony and herself and get rid of the lease on their apartment.

Her sister Elise, who knew about estates since she was working for a legal firm, asked hesitantly, "Do you think he left you very much, Clare?"

Clare thought of the way they had lived, spending money carelessly, sometimes lavishly. But there were always so many unpaid bills. She said, "No, I don't think so. He was building up the agency."

"He must have carried some life insurance."

"He never mentioned that," said Clare, "I never asked him. Of course I'll have to get a job. I'm sure I could get one in New York. Tony had a lot of friends."

"But you couldn't take the baby to New York. You're better off here."

"I suppose so," said Clare thoughtfully.

She felt out of touch with life in St. Ives. The girls she had known in High School were married or working and her contacts with them were superficial. Elise had a group of closer friends of her own, but they were older than Clare and she knew that they regarded her as a kind of brilliant maverick. Since the country had entered the world war, Clare had been possessed by an urge to do something patriotic, to blend into the war effort. It was a desire springing from the interests which had been seeded in her mind in college. But now she had to think instead of earning money. There was the baby to whom she belonged and for whom she would have to provide. Clare took her motherhood like that. Little Julia always had a claim on her, rather than being a possession.

She did not skimp on any care for the child. Even when she first went back to New York to settle things there, she left a competent nurse with the baby and Elise was there to superintend the household. Clare arranged for every contingency and did it calmly. But as the train pulled out of the station and Clare was separated from her child for the first time, emotion broke loose. She turned her face to the rain-streaked window and wept. She wanted physical comfort and closeness, the soft, fumbling touch of the baby, the expert caresses that Tony would never give her again. And her suffering ran deeper. She was weeping because her marriage had been a failure, because she had let herself be diverted

from the path she had meant to follow, and because the spirit of the girl who had made the Commencement speech had been tarnished. She had traded it in for spurious ambitions and excitements when she married Tony Delchamp and she knew it.

Clare did not realize at first what her position in New York had become or what problems it involved. Both Claude Gregory and Mary Floyd met her train and she found that they were looking to her for plans and decisions. Kate Munson and several others who had worked with Tony came around to see her within twenty-four hours. Many of them were genuinely grieved by Tony's death. They tried to cover up whatever might have happened in England by telling Clare stories about him that did him credit and praising his talents.

"He was the most brilliant agent in New-York," Kate Munson said, "nobody else could touch him."

"His clients are certainly worried," Mary Floyd told Clare.

"I know. They'll have to find other agents," said Clare.

"Are you going to give up the agency?"

"What else can I do?"

Kate Munson said, "If you are going to get rid of the agency, I'd like to know. I was very fond of Tony and I was on the inside of a lot of things he put over. Of course, with Tony gone, the agency isn't much more than a list. It hasn't much value. But I'd like to talk it over with you when you get squared around."

Clare found that she had a saleable property on her hands. She had not quite taken in that fact at first. Otherwise she was quite unprovided for. There was no trace of insurance. When Clare talked to the lawyer whom Tony had occasionally consulted about contracts, she found there was no will, as far as the lawyer knew. He said that he had urged Tony to make one but Tony never got around to doing it. His earlier wives had no claim on his estate and whatever was left belonged to Clare and her child.

"We'll start probate proceedings at once," said the lawyer, "there will be debts of course. And accounts receivable at the agency. Do you expect to continue the business, Mrs. Delchamp?"

"I hadn't thought of doing that," said Clare, "I hadn't thought that far."

"Well, you should take your time and look into it carefully. In Tony's line of work the chief assets are personality and goodwill. Such intangible things are difficult to sell and you might find it better to coast along for a bit. It's possible that it would be wise to continue the business for the present."

"I don't think I could."

But Mary and Claude thought otherwise.

"It's not just my job I'm thinking of," Mary told Clare in her downright way, "I can get something else. I certainly wouldn't want to work here for Kate Munson if she should take over. Her only idea is money and she's too foxy for my taste. Maybe it's none of my business to say this, Clare, but Tony loved the agency and he wouldn't want her to have it. It's a funny kind of monument to him but in a way that's what it could be if you carried on."

Claude had another argument.

"It would be a pity to let the agency go right now," he said, "when we're about to cash in on the Havighurst book. That will be out in a few months."

"Is it good? I haven't seen that manuscript," said Clare.

"It came in after you went West," said Mary, "it's very good."

That was high praise from Mary Floyd.

Claude said, "I think we have a sure best-seller there. The publishers are going to give it a big play—advertise him as a new American genius, and the people who have read it so far in proof sheets are ready to go all out for it in reviews. They're reading it in Hollywood and the first reports are favourable. With ten per cent for us on all that, it's no time to let the agency go unless you have to. I wish I could make a bid for

the business myself but I haven't any money. Give me a few years and maybe I can take it off your hands, Clare."

"You see how we feel," said Mary.

"But I have to go back to St. Ives. I've a baby out there."

"Have them send her down here."

"Oh, Claude, you don't send babies parcel post! And it's so much better for a child out there. Where would I keep her in New York?"

"Isn't there somebody to take care of her for you?"

"I've a nurse for the time being. But that runs into money. Of course my sister lives there."

"If the Havighurst book sells the way I think it's going to," said Claude, "you can get a fleet of nurses for the kid. And that fellow has some other good novels in him too. I don't know how many but it will take some time for that ego to run dry."

"It's not all ego," said Mary.

Claude grinned. "Lee has thawed the heart of our frigid Mary," he said and Mary told him to shut up.

But she said to Clare, "There are a lot of authors—you know this as well as I do—who are just beginning to pay off for the work that Tony did to promote them. If anyone else handles them from now on, he'll get no credit. With you it will still be the Delchamp agency. And Tony believed that you had more natural talent for this business than anyone he'd ever worked with. He told me that once."

"I'll have to think it out," said Clare.

She thought it out in Tony's little office during the next few days. It was easier to do it there than in the long, dark apartment where they had lived and which she had been so glad to give up. Here in his office Tony had been at his best. Here he had been brilliant and often very honest, as he was on the day when he told her that her stories were no good and that she would never make a writer. Clare remembered, he said I had a flair for criticism, that it was like having an ear for music without being able to perform. He was

honest too about not wanting to marry me, she admitted to herself. He never really wanted me as a wife. That was why everything personal between us was false, except the love-making.

But we got along very well here in the office, over the business. To keep it alive is the only thing I can do for him now, as Mary says. It is all he had to leave his child. But, she thought frankly, he didn't want Julia either.

It was risky to undertake the management of a business with the world at war, but for Clare there were a few bits of luck in going into the venture at that time. The draft had depleted the offices of some of her competitors, so her own small staff was not at too great a disadvantage. Claude Gregory had a history of rheumatic fever which kept him out of the armed services and he turned a secret, thwarted desire to fight into the effort to find war stories and articles that had more than ordinary interest. Mary Floyd worked indefatigably to keep the machinery of the office running smoothly so that Clare was free to give her time to making contacts with writers and editors. As for Clare herself, from the hour when she decided what she was going to do, she did not look backwards. Once more she closed a chapter. Nor for long did she think of the business as a monument to her dead husband. Within a few months, even before the war came to an end too abruptly for comfortable adjustment to peace, she was not continuing Tony Delchamp's literary agency. She was running one of her own.

The Havighurst novel was the success they had hoped for. It was witty and cynical. It treated emotion as transient. That suited the taste of many people who were unwilling to feel deeply and regarded it as unsophisticated to suffer. It set a new fashion in fiction. But Clare had no intention of relying on one or two talents. She also soon sold the bitter autobiography of a returned soldier who did not mince his words

in writing about experiences in the trenches. That too became a best-selling book. Her third big success was the marketing of a popular analysis of the economic dangers that the world was facing, which caught the public interest. It had been refused by several agents and publishers but Clare gambled on it and won. After that, astonishingly young as she was, Clare Delchamp and her agency had to be taken seriously in the literary trade world. Her reputation grew quickly. More writers wanted her to handle their work and the editors and publishers were eager to find out what she had to sell.

She played in luck, but as Tony had said from the start, she had a talent for the work she had undertaken. She used every attribute that had been bred into her or taught her. The political ability inherited from her father, the scanty intellectualism of her four years in college, the charm and enthusiasm which had made her a leader among her friends there, the stubbornness which had made Tony marry her, all were useful now and though she used her gifts unconsciously they were no less effective.

Money was the thread that held the various parts of her life together and often in the first years it seemed about to snap and let all she was trying to accomplish scatter to the winds. But she always managed to keep the thread from breaking. It was necessary to spend money on entertainment when it would serve a business purpose, to help along a sale or encourage a writer. She took over Tony's charge accounts at the Marguery and Brevoort and sometimes their monthly totals appalled her. When prohibition came in, it was no cheaper. She had cards to all the best speakeasies, and in her trade a great deal of business was done in the half-hidden bars and cocktail rooms. The good ones were expensive. Also Clare knew that part of her stock-in-trade was to be arrestingly beautiful in public and, though she could drive a hard bargain in the shops, she had to buy exciting clothes and not be seen in the same ones too often. There were always too the expenses in St. Ives to be met and the cost of travel back and forth.

She economized fiercely when there was nothing to be gained from spending money. She took a room in a small, inexpensive hotel in Washington Square. It was hardly more than a little cell but she came back to it—usually on the bus—with a feeling of having a secret refuge of her own. She never asked anyone to visit her there.

"I just commute to New York," she often said to people. "Of course my business is here but I really live in St. Ives. I've a little girl out there, you know."

At first she had considered bringing Julia to New York with her but Elise had opposed that. Clare, thinking of kidnappers and the wages of New York nurses, had been glad to yield on that point. For the time being, she told Elise. But the time stretched into months and when one year had passed, it was easy to duplicate it with another. Julia learned to walk and to talk. Elise had found a middle-aged widow named Martha Hamm who was searching for a permanent home and she became both nurse and housekeeper in the old house. Her attachment to the child made her invaluable to all of them.

The living arrangements seemed wholesome for the little girl and comfortable for Elise, though not so much so for Clare, who made cross-country trips several times a month to visit her child. With a brief-case laden with manuscripts to read, Clare became a familiar figure on the fast trains. She went to Hollywood to conclude sales and raise prices. She took authors to Philadelphia to confer with the great magazine editors. She went to Washington to persuade a Cabinet official to write his memoirs and came back with his promise.

Literary circles in New York were well aware of Clare Delchamp before she began to attract notice in St. Ives. But five years after she had taken over the agency, there were two things that gave her a new status in her home city. The first was the fact that she was the person who handled the sale of Maud Sothorn's amazingly successful novel and the second was that Clare built a house in St. Ives. The two

enterprises were loosely linked together, the novel coming first.

The Sothern family was one of the most important ones in St. Ives both financially and socially. The members of its fourth generation in residence there were as well known as the buildings and boulevards named after them. They were immensely charitable. Some of them travelled diligently. But it was not an intellectual family and certainly not a whimsical one. Clare could hardly credit the fact that the mousy, lank-haired and very scared young woman who came to her office one day was an authentic Sothern. Mary Floyd probably would not have let her see Clare at all but the caller had murmured in total embarrassment that she was from St. Ives.

"I thought she might be a nursemaid or something," said Mary in later astonishment. "

Maud Sothern had a manuscript with her. She began by saying that she didn't think it was much good but the idea had come to her when she was living in France last winter and she couldn't help writing it. She said, "I thought that maybe, Mrs. Delchamp, you would be willing to read it and tell me if it's any good at all. I come from St. Ives and I know that you used to live there."

"I still do," said Clare automatically, "I commute back and forth. I have a little girl out there."

Clare had a bad hangover that morning after a long session at 21 the night before. She was impatient with the hangover and herself. She could guess from the apologetic presentation what this manuscript would be like.

She said, "I'm so sorry—Miss Sothern, is it? "

"Yes."

The name brought to Clare a mental picture of those great houses on the bluffs above the river.

"It's a familiar name in St. Ives. Mr. Talbot Sothern."

"He's my father. I don't want to waste your time, Mrs. Delchamp. I'd be glad to pay any reading fee."

"I don't charge reading fees. I only handle material that

I think is saleable," said Clare. She felt a certain curiosity at the fact that one of the Sotherns had taken the trouble to write anything. To her own surprise she said she would look it over. A page or two would tell the tale, she thought, wishing that her head would stop aching. By noon it would. No hangover lasted longer than noon with Clare because she was so young and healthy. She looked up at the girl and saw what hope and excitement had done to that shy face. Clare smiled and said, "Let's both hope, Miss Sothern."

The next morning Clare came into the office and dumped the manuscript on Claude Gregory's desk. She said, "Will you read that and tell me if I'm crazy? I believe it's a find—that we can sell it for serial as a FAMOUS FIRST and that any publisher would fight for it. It has everything—it's perfectly true and realistic and it couldn't have happened—it's sweet and it understands cruelty—you read it."

"Who wrote it? I never heard of this person."

"I think she must have picked it up in the street," said Clare.

But Maud Sothern actually had written it and everything that Clare prophesied for the novel came true. Its most unexpected effect was to make Clare a celebrity in St. Ives, for Maud Sothern gave her agent all the credit for her own success. They became friends and when Clare went out to see Julia the next time she dined in the Sothern home.

Little that Clare did surprised her sister very much any more, but she was startled when Clare said some months later, "I think I'll build a house, Elise."

"Build a house in New York? Does anyone? "

"No—out here. This old shack is falling to pieces."

"We can make do for a while," said Elise. "What on earth would you build a house for out here? "

"It's where I was born. And where Julia's growing up."

"But you're in New York practically all the time."

"I know. I have to be. But this would be an investment. We can plan it so you have the quarters you should have,

and Julia could have a lovely room of her own—with a window-seat—and Martha could rejoice in a private bathroom—there would have to be a room for me too——”

“And how much time would you spend in it?”

“Not much for a while anyhow. But I like to think of having a house. And I don’t want Julia to grow up to be ashamed of the place where she lives. This neighbourhood has gone to seed completely.”

“Julia’s only five.”

“That’s old enough to notice. And she ought to go to the Country Day School. If I built in that district she could.”

“But you can’t afford to build a house, can you, Clare?”

“No,” agreed Clare. But there was a speculative look in her eyes which showed that she had not relinquished the idea.

Within the year the house was completed. It occasioned a good deal of comment because it was extremely modern in design. There was no other like it in the entire city. The stories that began to circulate about its owner were many and varied. It was said that she had never even seen the plans for the house but had left its building entirely to an architect. It was said that she had made an enormous amount of money. There was a story that half the writers in New York were in love with her. Gossip said that she left all the care of her own child to her poor sister. Or else that she worked like a slave to support her child and her sister. She had really written Maud Sothern’s book. The Sothern family had given her the house. And the rumours and gossip finally came to terms with the facts of a small and beautiful house set on a rise in the bluff which overlooked the river, and a healthy, sober-faced little girl enrolled in the Country Day School for her first term. Once or twice a month a taxi rolled up to the front door after the morning train from the East came in and Clare Delchamp spent a few days at her technical home.

Clare had built the house for several reasons, some of which she never defined even to herself. It was a kind of propitiation to her own decency and safety. She loved New York as she had since she first turned her steps to the city and away from St. Ives. But she loved it without trusting it. To own a substantial and mannerly house in the Middle West was her defence against a life which had no sound base. She built it because she felt guilty about her relations with Julia, who loved Martha Hamm more than she loved her mother. Clare dazzled and excited Julia and often the child would follow her around all the time when she was at home in St. Ives. But if Julia was hurt or feeling ill, it was Martha or Elise to whom she ran for comfort and help. Clare knew she had no right to be jealous. She was sure that, when Julia was old enough to understand the situation, they would be closer. None the less, she wanted to do something important, something more than was necessary for Julia now.

She built the house too because it was a sober financial undertaking which reassured her about her own stability. The atmosphere of her life in New York was conditioned by prohibition and the habits it formed. Clare drank too much but so did almost everyone she knew, except Mary Floyd who didn't drink at all. Drinking was a way of life. They knew, Clare and her clever associates, that it could be ruinous. Every now and then some bright mind cracked and the shining pieces of it couldn't be put together again. The stouter characters and the cagier ones did not want that to happen to them so they adopted personal disciplines to protect their minds and their livers. Some never drank before sundown. Some began with olive oil or oysters. Some never drank in places where they did not know who the bootleggers were. Some touched nothing but Scotch whisky. Some stuck to brandy. Clare always took gin.

They lived with a continual feeling of being adventurous, even though they knew the adventure was a fake, with its peepholes in doors and contraband liquor trucked through the

streets at night or landed on lonely beaches. They were committed to rebellion against a law which seemed both absurd and tyrannical. They had come to love the cloudy merri-ment, the amazing encounters with strangers, the new pattern of behaviour. No one was really to blame for anything. There was no limit to the frankness of the talk in speakeasies. Some of it seemed brilliant at the time.

As Clare said, "At four o'clock in the morning there we were, Hans Versattle and Irving and I, arguing about whether the Roman Catholics or the Russian Communists would ultimately control the world. It was a wonderful discussion."

"I'll bet it was," said Mary Floyd.

"Don't make fun of me, you Carrie Nation. It was good talk."

"You must be dead on your feet."

"No, I'm not. I feel fine today."

Often Clare did feel fine. At least after noon time, and a couple of glasses of tomato juice. If she felt that she had drunk too much, she would firmly resolve to drink no alcohol for the next few days. But probably before five o'clock Lee Havighurst or some other client or editor would call up and ask her to meet him at 47 East 52nd for a cocktail. It was always a special occasion. There was something to talk over, revise or plan. She would be there by six o'clock. Probably at nine she would still be there, in conversation that was slightly feverish.

But the business went on successfully. The deals increased in number and in value. More money went through the agency every month. Clare paid off the second mortgage on her house within two years and could see where the money to pay off the first one was coming from. When they needed more office space, Clare rented it with assurance. The agency did not change its location for her little office seemed too lucky to be abandoned. Mary Floyd was given a private room with her name on the door and Clare had a personal secretary. She was thirty-four. Sometimes that seemed very old and again quite young to her.

During that year an article written about Clare Delchamp was published in the *Metropolis Magazine*. A business man who was travelling back to St. Ives from Chicago read it in his compartment on the train and wondered sceptically how much of it was true. Years later Jerome Tarrant told Clare with amusement about reading the "profile" and doubting its accuracy. It quoted Clare as saying there was no time in her day for romance. Tarrant was somewhat interested because he lived in St. Ives. He had seen and rather admired the house that Clare Delchamp had built. But he had never laid eyes on the young woman herself and it was some time after that before he did.

They met one night in New York at 21, which was the most notable of all the speakeasies. Jerome Tarrant was there with a New York banker and several other men. It was a business party, arranged as a treat for the out-of-towners, for there were nearly always celebrities to be seen at 21, and a visit to its amazing wine-cellars was possible for guests of sufficient distinction. The home offices of Charters Electric had always been in St. Ives but much of its financing was done in New York and that brought Jerome Tarrant, who was vice-president in charge of appliances, to the big city now and then. He had seen the wine-cellars before and while the rest of the party went to inspect them, Tarrant sat at a corner of the bar and watched a kind of life with which he had no connection.

He noticed the girl when she first came in. She was tall but lithe, and carried herself with confidence though not as if she wanted or needed to attract attention. She gave several people a smile, as if she were used to seeing them, and Jerome liked the way that her friends looked at her. There was a man with her and they sat down at one of the small tables across the room. It was the girl who faced Jerome and he was glad of that. She was worth watching.

The man began to talk earnestly, as if continuing a discussion. The woman—Tarrant saw that she was young but not a girl—listened beautifully. She had brown-gold hair that was

uncurled and shaped to her head. When she loosened her coat and flung it back against her armchair it was dramatic, for it was lined with fur more golden than her hair. She drew off her long black gloves as the waiter placed a stem glass in front of her. Every gesture she made attracted Jerome Tarrant. He watched her with pleasure and at length that drew her eyes towards him. She did not quite smile, but she did not discard his glance.

His host came back with one of the proprietors whom Jerome had met before. The rest of the party had gone upstairs to the dining-room but the banker said there was no hurry to join them. They were drinking.

"More exciting down here," he said, "you see all the celebrities here."

"Who is the girl at the table in the corner?" asked Jerome.

The banker did not know. The proprietor looked and answered.

"That's Mrs. Delchamp. Clare Delchamp. Very well known in the literary world. It's Louis Boyd with her, the publisher."

"That's interesting. I believe she comes from my home town."

"Then you know her?"

"No, I don't." And Jerome Tarrant added, some compulsion destroying his usual habit of reserve, "I'd like to meet her some time."

"Let me take you over now. She won't mind." The proprietor caught Clare's eye and he waved at her and then took Jerome's elbow and moved him towards the table where the man and the girl were sitting.

"This is very bold and impudent of me," said Jerome Tarrant, "but we're a long way from home—I merely wanted to pay my respects—glad to meet you, Mr. Boyd—I mustn't interrupt."

"It's all right," said Louis Boyd who was a gentleman and knew another when he saw one.

"I think it's very friendly of you," said Clare.

She had noticed him at the bar because he was so very handsome, so quietly observant and because he admired her. Now, as he spoke in apology and yet with dignity, she thought, I like him. His name was vaguely familiar, connected with some business or story. What had she heard about him? She remembered almost instantly. This was the man whose wife had been crippled in a hunting accident and he was completely devoted to her.

"Do sit down for a minute and tell me about the home town," she said.

* * *

So many years ago. What year was it when she and Jerome had met that first time? She knew. The events and changes which she had not been willing to talk about to Jean Humber tonight were all there in Clare's mind, neatly put away, chapter by chapter, for she was an orderly person. But she had no use for the past. None of it could be worn again. It did not fit her any more. What had unwrapped it tonight? The sight of Jean, the claim of her own generation? The feeling that the woman who fell on the street might have been or would be herself, or the knowledge that no man would wittingly pursue her again? Or the way Belinda had talked about her love and the pain of the likeness?

Benny, the waiter, saw Clare lift the glass in which the last piece of ice was melting and came over to ask, "Another Tom Collins, Mrs. Delchamp?"

She said, "It's Mrs. Tarrant, Benny. It's been Mrs. Tarrant for many years."

"I beg your pardon, madam. I lose track of names. It's been a long while since you've been in to visit us. I haven't seen the gentleman in some time either."

"No," said Clare, but told him no more. "Nothing more, thank you, Benny. Just the check."

She felt a little unsteady. If Jerome were here that wouldn't

matter for he was always steady. Without him, she could very easily be ashamed of herself. Clare thought, the idea spinning around in her mind, there's something a little shameful about loneliness, something that's your own fault.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PHILIP MERTON'S high, thin house had been fitted into its place on the street for nearly a hundred years. Its entrance was classic and inconspicuous, an oak door with a simple fanlight, set in brick under four tiers of windows. Merton always said that his was the narrowest private house in Manhattan.

From the outside no one could guess at the elegance within. The veins of pink Italian marble in the hall had crystallized in waves and gave an effect of severe and beautiful drapery. It was as rare as most of the eighteenth-century furniture in the drawing-room on the second floor. A gilded bird-cage elevator imported from France always afforded an amusing beginning to conversation. The safest American mechanism had been installed in it, for Merton took no chances with accidents or lawsuits.

At a party like the one tonight, the guests went first to a room on the top floor to greet their host and have cocktails. Merton would explain to anyone who had never seen the room before that this was his reluctant concession to modernity. The attics which used to be servants' quarters were walled with glass and a few growing orchids waited to be admired. The dining-room was below, on the first floor, and somewhere on the third and fourth floors were the bedrooms,

as private as Merton believed bedrooms should be in a gentleman's house, their doors invariably closed.

Every appointment for the dinner had been considered and chosen by Mr. Merton. When he repeated a menu or a table decoration it was only because it would not be improved upon. He was well satisfied tonight. For some reason which he had not yet analysed, he found this occasion reassuring. Much as he had always liked to tread the measures of social life, he had been aware lately that his enjoyment was not what it used to be. That had bothered him. He had even spoken to his doctor about it.

But tonight everything felt as it should. He could sense the flow of pleasure around him and it carried his along too. The company had distinction and variety, the mixture that Merton liked best. It numbered only ten, for at the last moment the young Howards had been unable to come. Merton had been annoyed, not so much by their absence as by the fact that it made the seating arrangement at the table difficult and it was too late to ask other guests. With twelve, he invariably put a man at the head of the table and that distributed the men's black coats and the women's bare shoulders evenly. But when there were ten, it was necessary to put a woman opposite him.

He had decided to put Clare Tarrant in that place. Leila Grayson would expect to be at his right she thought all parties were in her honour - Sue Parker was sure to be dressed in some flaring colour and she had grown heavy. She would ruin the effect of the delicate porcelain figurines if he let her dominate that end of the table. Minna Lane had been trying to marry him or someone else for years and would have new false hopes if he let her sit at the head of the table, and the beautiful granddaughter was of course too young to preside. But Clare was very decorative in her silver brocade dress, and she had made no comment on the seating, which gratified Merton.

He thought that Clare's beauty had increased with the years. She had taken him by surprise on the afternoon when

he called on her at the hotel. She did not look ravaged by grief or worry as so many widows did. She was not out of shape and that showed control. Nor was there any apparent pretence of cosmetics. Of course, thought Merton regarding her with appreciation, she had been considerably younger than Jerome Tarrant. But if her granddaughter was past twenty, and Clare had said that she was, Clare certainly must be sixtyish, even allowing for very early marriages of both her daughter and herself.

She and Jerome had made a very good thing of their marriage, reflected Merton, listening only a little to what Leila Grayson was saying about de Gaulle. He did not agree but he never allowed himself—or anyone else if he could help it—to get into arguments at a dinner party in his house. I doubted that Jerome's second marriage would work, Merton recalled. I knew of his attachment to Clare and marriage can be a fatal cloture to a different relationship. Not that anyone actually knew what was between them. They conducted themselves with great discretion and dignity. Jerome was extremely proud of Clare. He should have been. She's always been a most attractive woman, and she's acquired a beautiful patina. Her beauty may be a little worn but Sheffield silver can be lovelier when the copper begins to show through. The analogy amused him. He would have liked to tell it to Clare but naturally he must not.

She seems to be enjoying herself, Merton thought. Of course she and Havighurst would have a good deal in common. She was in the literary world too at one time. He's monopolizing her and I wanted her to get acquainted with Geoffrey Grayson because he could be very useful to her when she goes to Paris, and of course she will travel. From what Clare told me, she can afford to do what she pleases.

Havighurst is useful as an extra man. He's a good talker, keeps things going. But I've never liked the fellow. He's a poseur. I wonder if he has enough to live on. I've seen his name posted for dues at the club once or twice but he seems to get by. The Prindles have nothing to do with him, I'm

sure. They thought Jane was well rid of him and she's remarried now very substantially. He's been married since—once or twice. Clare must know his history. Evidently he's paying her some attention. She said they had been lunching. I hope she won't get involved with him.

It's a little hard for dear Minna to be on the other side of Havighurst—he's almost ignoring her, though I hardly blame him for not wanting to look at that magenta satin dress. But young Peter Sulgrave is doing his duty by Minna. That's an attractive lad. Clare should be pleased if anything comes of that, though the girl is a beauty and ought to be able to pick and choose.

Leila Grayson said to him challengingly, "But de Gaulle seems to have no sense of humour."

"It may be just as well, my dear. Algeria is no laughing matter. I know the most delightful man who settled there when there was less trouble. I'm sure he's back in Paris now—he has a place just outside of Nancy too. I must give you his address. He has some Bouchers that are worth seeing."

Clare was not watching Belinda. But from where she sat the girl was in her line of vision. Belinda had been placed between Geoffrey Grayson and Sue Parker's husband, and both men were competing for her attention. Across the table Peter was being polite to the older women on either side of him but he hardly took his eyes from his girl.

What is her special gift of attraction, wondered Clare. It's not just beauty. More than youth. She'll always have it. She is yielding, not contentious, but she's exciting too. She's what those two men wanted and probably thought they were going to get once upon a time. And instead Geoffrey Grayson got him ambitious Leila, who will make him the man-of-all-work in her salon, and the Parker man got an heiress with no eye for colour. Belinda can charm the young ones too. Peter Sulgrave is obviously mad for her, even more than he was when Jerome and I saw him before. Would Belinda be happy with him? Why not? He's a persevering boy and he'd be loyal, I'm sure. They'd have fine children. They delighted

Phil when they came to give what he calls flavour to his party. They made a lovely picture when they came in together. A picture—that's the trouble with it. Not that Belinda is posing but something that I saw in her before is withdrawn or lost.

Havighurst was pursuing the subject he had brought up not only tonight but the other day when they had lunch together.

"Certainly you must live in New York, Clare. Of course not in the hotel. I know a woman who could find you a charming apartment."

"I have a home in St. Ives."

"So you always used to say."

"I did, didn't I? "

"It was a fixation of some sort. An analyst could explain it to you."

She laughed. "It's a little late. I've never been psycho-analysed."

"That's nothing to boast about. It's like saying you've never been to a dentist."

"I've not often needed one of those."

"You're amazing."

"Lucky, that's all—at least I was. Not now."

"Don't mope. Get rid of your little grey home in the West and settle down here."

"And be one of the women in black and mink who supports the hairdressers and eats at Longchamps restaurants? "

"Good God, no! "

"Then what would I do with myself? "

"Entertain. Be a patron of letters——"

"Claude suggested that I go back to the agency."

"He would. Claude is slipping. He has a stable of second-rate writers today," said Havighurst with venom. "He sells what he thinks the public wants. Literary Westerns."

"I haven't seen his list," said Clare, "but Mary Floyd says that they have some new writers who are very good. I went to see Marv the other day. She's not well."

"Poor old girl," said Havighurst carelessly.

"She had tremendous faith in you from the very beginning, Lee."

And you must have known that she was in love with you, Clare did not say.

"Mary used to be very intelligent. She was a far better critic than Claude. But her ankles were defeating. There was a small permanent bulge above the ankle bone——"

"Ah don't——"

"I only mention it because it is one of the small things that can motivate a life," said Lee. "She was conscious of the imperfections of her legs. Used to tuck them under. But I too was very fond of Mary."

"Not fond enough."

"Why do women always want such large portions of emotion?" asked Lee. "If they get them it ruins their attractiveness."

"That sounds clever, but it isn't true."

"You don't think so." It was not a question but a reassertion.

"No. I had the largest helping of emotion a woman could possibly have. Of course I don't claim attractiveness now."

"You can. Perhaps you were more abstemious than you know. But look at the lovely child—what is her name, did you say Belinda?—she's not been stuffing herself with emotion and her unconscious look of hunger makes her very appealing, very beautiful."

He sees, thought Clare. But not far because he doesn't care.

Lee was diverted by the next course. "How delicious to have a savoury instead of a lump of lettuce. Our host may look like an ageing Belgian hare but he doesn't give us rabbit food. He is an epicure. I suppose he will want you to marry him."

"Don't be preposterous."

"Am I?"

"Philip was a very close friend of my husband. Of Jerome." Clare turned to Geoffrey Grayson.

The savoury was made of mushrooms and Canadian bacon. The sweet which followed was an English trifle, soaked in brandy. Belinda refused it and, seeing that, Philip Merton leaned forward to urge her to change her mind.

"Take just a taste. It's a speciality of the house."

She smiled and did as she was told. "It's delicious," she told Merton, "I only wish I knew how to make it."

"I'll have the recipe copied out for you. You're interested in cooking?"

"Oh yes," said Belinda, "it can be so exciting. You can get wonderful things in the foreign groceries on Lexington——"

She stopped. Clare saw Belinda's thoughts go into hiding again.

The perfect grapes and pears were served and then, at the very moment when Philip wanted it, Clare rose and said, "I think, Phil, that the ladies will leave you now."

Merton stood, holding the door for her to lead them out. He thought, she has perfect grace. And, as he went back to the table and the brandy was poured, his recent talk with the doctor linked up with this occasion.

* * *

"There's nothing organic wrong, Phil," the doctor had said, "you should have a good many years ahead of you."

"I've felt run down. Could it be my liver? I seem to have lost my pep."

"Since when?"

"Quite some time. I haven't really felt myself since Otto died. That was a shock of course."

"You replaced your man?"

"I have another servant to do his work. But Otto was irreplaceable. He'd been with me since my wife died. Twenty-two years."

"That could account for this vague depression you complained of. Perhaps you feel the loss of a certain devotion."

"Which doesn't come in pills or bottles."

"No, but it's available."

"How do you mean?"

"Many a man of seventy, and past that age, marries again."

"I'll never marry again. I wouldn't consider it."

"You shouldn't rule it out," the doctor said, "companionship is a great tonic."

* * *

There had been something very agreeable in having Clare smile at him as she went out of the dining-room, and in having her at the head of his table tonight. Philip Merton tasted the brandy approvingly. The talk began to concern itself with national politics. Each of the older men made his usual statements and each was thinking of something else. Geoffrey Grayson thought glumly of living in Paris, which was not his favourite city. No club life, nothing normal. Mr. Parker was guessing what the stock market would do on Monday. Young Peter Sulgrave sipped his cordial—though it was a sissy kind of drink—and wondered when he and Belinda could break away. His leave would be over tomorrow and when would he see her again? If she would only promise—tonight he would ask her again to marry him. Lee Havighurst drank fast and had his glass refilled twice. He was reflecting that Clare was still a show piece and wondering how much money she had.

They joined the ladies in the drawing-room, which was so faithful to the nineteenth century, without coming to any conclusion about the dangers of inflation. The card tables were set up. Peter glanced at Belinda with pleading and she went to her host to say good-bye.

"Will you forgive us if we go, Mr. Merton? Peter is a dancer and his leave is so short."

"Of course, my dear. That was our bargain. You were kind to come."

"It's been so nice. And I love your house."

"Well, it's a funny old place but I admit that I'm fond of it."

"I know you are—this house has the kind of feeling that only comes when a house is loved by the people who live in it."

"You're a sweet child," said Merton. He was unusually moved by her remark.

Belinda said, "Clare and Jerome had the same feeling in their house."

She and Peter made mannerly farewells, coming last to Clare, who lifted her face for Belinda's kiss.

"Have a good time. And if you are late and happen to be close to the Embassy when your evening dissipation is over, remember that I have an extra bed," said Clare. "It might be easier than going back to your apartment. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll leave an extra key for you at the desk just in case."

"I'll probably go home. But thank you, Clare."

"Do as you please."

They settled to their bridge game. Havighurst lost three rubbers and cursed inwardly, his dark face growing more surly as the cards fell. God damn it, to have to worry about fifty dollars when all of these others were reeking with money. Clare and Merton won substantially. The cut had made them partners and their success gave Merton a glow that did not come from money.

"You play good bridge, Clare. How's your gin rummy game?"

"You should know," said Clare, "Jerome taught me. I didn't know a King from a Jack until after we were married. But sometimes I beat him. We always kept a running score, even when we were travelling. Once on a ship——"

Clare did not finish that sentence. She said, "Oh, it's my deal. Are these cut?" and picked up the cards. Never again, she thought as they fell. And she could almost see the ocean turning copper-coloured in the sunset and hear Jerome deciding that they had time for one more game.

Geoffrey Grayson said, "All right, one more game."

When that was over, and the Parkers had left her at the Embassy, it was long past midnight. As she took her key from her evening bag, Clare remembered her promise to Belinda and went back to speak to the desk clerk.

"It's possible that my granddaughter, Miss Belinda Rood, may come in later to spend the night in my apartment. Will you give her the extra key? She needn't register."

She did not expect Belinda to come. But Clare was wakeful. She lay in bed thinking of the people she had been with tonight. Why was she sorry for Lee when he was both vain and cruel? Because he was so frightened and defeated under the arrogance? He was far worse off than Mary Floyd. For Lee had decayed in mind and character. Mary's mind was healthy in spite of her worn-out body. She thought of Mary's frugal life during all the years of working, her acceptance of the need to be unselfish. Mary had made it possible for other people to be rich or famous or both. She was the source of money that men like Lee had wasted, or spent on love-making, or on travel to the distant places of the world. But Mary herself had never gone anywhere. Her income had been eaten up by obscure relatives and by all the operations that always had to be done over again.

Philip had certainly been at his best tonight, thought Clare. I never liked him better. The remark that Lee had made about her marrying Philip came back with a prick of annoyance. Lee liked to be insolent. He knew that for her to marry Phil would be fantastic. But of course to Lee marriage was only a bargain for some amorous or financial gain. He didn't know, would never believe, that a man and woman could belong permanently and inescapably to each other.

She heard the tiny clink of a key, a soft step in the foyer—Belinda had come after all. The luminous dial of the clock on the bedside table showed that it was three o'clock—not late for New York amusements.

The girl came into the bedroom with almost no sound.

Clare said, "Don't try to be quiet, Linda. I'm not asleep."

"Did I wake you?"

"No, I've not been asleep. I didn't get in myself until after one, and I've been lying here thinking about my sins and other people's virtues." She snapped on the light beside her, and pushed up her pillow. "I'm so glad you came."

"I didn't want to go home," said Belinda.

"Did you have fun?"

"We danced. Then went to Reuben's and talked for a while."

"Peter is a very reasonable boy. Man."

"He's twenty-five," said Belinda, pulling her dress over her head. She was shadowy thin without it. "He finished his law course before he went into the forces. He'll make a very good lawyer."

"He might make a good husband, too," said Clare. "You'll find a nightdress in the second drawer in the high-boy."

Belinda found one and slipped it on. She shook out her hair and sat down on the far edge of the other bed.

"I hope I won't disturb you," she said.

Clare laughed. "You used to say a-sturb when you were a child. And you were very scrupulous about not doing it. I love having you here. That empty bed can drive me crazy sometimes."

"Yes," said Belinda, as if she understood.

"Put that blanket around your shoulders if you're going to sit there."

Belinda did it, absently. "Clare, can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"What was my grandfather like? Not Jerome. The real one."

It was a completely unexpected question and Clare hesitated. She must answer honestly.

"He was a fascinating person," she said. "Clever. Handsome. He was a restless man."

"Were you in love with him?"

"I must have thought so."

"As much as you were with Jerome?"

"Oh no—no, it was very different. Tony bedazzled me. And I was so young when I married him. I don't suppose I had the capacity then for a profound love."

"How old were you?"

"Not quite twenty-one. I was just twenty when I got out of college and came to New York. And girls were greener—much more unsophisticated than they are today."

"I was wondering," said Belinda, "if you could feel the same way twice. About two different people. I can't imagine your being married to anyone except Jerome."

"Nor can I. I don't think I was actually. Of course Tony was my legal husband. And we had a child, though he never saw your mother, you know. But with Jerome it was a real marriage."

"I don't believe you can contrive a marriage," said Belinda.

"You can create one," Clare said gently. "Peter wants to marry you, doesn't he?"

"Yes. That's what we were talking about tonight. Before I knew Henry I thought that perhaps I might marry Peter. I hadn't promised. I suppose I was waiting—I knew I was. But I wanted to marry—you naturally think about it. Living alone is so unfinished—so temporary for a girl. And there is a clean quality about Peter. So many men are sly. He's not."

"If you felt once that you could marry Peter, you will probably feel that way again."

"What he'd get from me now wouldn't be good enough."

"Does he know about Henry?"

"He knows there was someone. Someone I can't marry, so Peter thinks it doesn't matter. That I'd forget. That he could wash it all out."

"And don't you think he may be right?"

"No," said the girl with her curious sureness.

"Marriage is happier than any relation between a man and woman outside of it, Linda."

"Is it?" asked Belinda. She leaned across the bed, turned off the light and said good night again. Then she lay very still, like the little girl who would not cling to anyone for comfort.

She doesn't believe that's true, thought Clare in the darkness. How can I convince her? I know it's true. Jerome and I were far happier after we were married. The worry was gone, and there was the sureness and the pride. I was never so happy—wasn't I?—there were wonderful times, when I had nothing from Jerome but love and could give him nothing else, and I used to walk on air.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE relationship between Clare Delchamp and Jerome Tarrant had grown slowly. At first neither of them had the slightest notion of becoming deeply involved in the other's life, nor any desire to do so. To Clare it was a novelty to know a man like Jerome, whose interests were so completely different from her own. To attract him and to prove that she could do it was a test of her own charm. It gave a new string to her bow.

What had been written about her in the personal article which Jerome had read and doubted before he met her was almost true. Not quite. No young woman of her beauty had not had the small brief adventures that went with a life attended by a good deal of liquor and a strong accent on sex. But she had always been fastidious, and after Tony had been unfaithful there was a secret shame in Clare because she had not been able to be sufficient for the man she married. Underneath her increasing charm and worldliness she was the burned child, the college girl who hadn't passed.

Another thing which kept her more chaste than most of her friends was business shrewdness. She saw enough of sex relationships to know that they could not go along with the clear, impersonal dealings necessary between a client and an agent, or an agent and an editor. She might go to the far

edges of friendliness but she would stop without letting herself be pulled into a deeper emotion with a different claim. The urge to do so had not been great enough in the years when she had lived in New York before meeting Jerome. The men in her group knew it, Claude, Havighurst, Hans Versattle and the others. It gave them a special relationship with her. They talked to her about their love affairs, would often give her a chance to have one with them, and were usually or before long—as Clare well knew—relieved and grateful that she had not become an emotional problem.

It was amusing and distinctive too to be somewhat in a class by herself. After she had gained her reputation for charm with coolness, it was a matter of pride not to lose it. The habit became one that no casual attraction could break. And she was so busy. But no one enjoyed the admiration she excited or measured it more accurately than Clare.

During the months which followed their casual meeting in 21, she gave Jerome Tarrant no serious thought. She liked him. It had been natural that he should ask her to lunch after that first encounter and he did. She accepted with a feeling of amused triumph—he was an important man from her home city, the first one who came from St. Ives to pay her attention. She was prepared to tease him a little with her charm.

But she found that although he was ingenuous in some ways, he was not to be mocked. He planned that first occasion with good taste. They lunched in public view, at the Ritz. He was careful to mention his wife and the limitations which her invalidism placed around their social life, but he spoke of that without complaint. The men whom Clare knew usually talked of women with desire or despair or contempt. They were not gentle and protective.

If they had not happened to meet in a Chicago railway station on a November night, that might have been the end of it. But possibly not. For when Jerome Tarrant recognized Clare, there was a pleasure in his face which neither his dignity nor shyness could mask. They were, they discovered,

both on their way home to St. Ives and that meant an overnight trip. They had a drink in the lounge. They dined together, lingering in the dining-car until it had been deserted by all the other travellers. They finished their talk in Clare's compartment, yet were not done when they parted. By that time they were explaining themselves, as if it mattered what they thought of each other.

"It seems to me that you work very hard," he said with concern.

"It's interesting. And sometimes useful. Besides, I have to work. I have a little girl to bring up."

"And you said she lives in St. Ives?"

"Yes, it's better for a child there than in New York. She's why I dash back and forth. And why I built a house there. My sister was going to live with us but all of a sudden she married—no one could have been more surprised than she was when an old beau of hers who lives in California came back and claimed her for his own love. Fortunately I've an extraordinary housekeeper who's been with us for some years and she takes wonderful care of Julia. I'd like to have her with me more but I can when she's older."

"You're carrying a big load."

"Not too big," said Clare and suddenly felt tired and comforted and as if she might cry.

"I hope I'll see you while you're in St. Ives," he said.

"I'll only be there a few days."

"If Helen—if my wife were able to entertain—it would be the greatest pleasure for us but she can't do that sort of thing——"

"I understand perfectly," said Clare. "I'd love to have you stop by to see me and meet my child, some day. Your wife doesn't go out at all?"

"No. Helen is paralysed."

"I'm sorry."

"She doesn't suffer—that's the blessing."

"What caused it?"

"I'm afraid I did," said Jerome Tarrant. "May I tell you about it?"

"Not if it hurts you."

"I'd like to tell you. I'd like you to know—for some reason. I don't often talk about it. We were not married long when it happened. You see I used to hunt and fish a lot—I always loved those things and I wanted Helen to enjoy them, too. She had never done anything like that—she wasn't athletic in any way. I suppose I was selfish. We went on this little hunting trip. She was reluctant to go—that's why I always blame myself. I thought her gun was unloaded—I had warned her never to take a loaded gun in the car, of course—but she was inexperienced. It went off in the car—she was hit in the spine."

"But how were you to blame? How can you think it was your fault?"

He said grimly, "I was the man. I was in charge." And then, "I hope I haven't depressed you. I just wanted you to understand—I'm afraid you'll think I'm a dreary egotist."

"I think you are a very good man," said Clare, "and I don't say that lightly. I don't often link good and man."

"It's been a wonderful trip," he said. "I shall think of this trip every time I take the train."

Clare was having a conference with Maud Sothern while she was in St. Ives. Maud needed prodding on a new book and when that was done, it was easy to find out more about Jerome Tarrant.

"Do you know a man called Tarrant? Jerome Tarrant?"

"Oh yes. Do you know Jerome?"

"I met him in New York. And we came up on the train together last night."

"Isn't it tragic?"

"You mean about his wife? He seems devoted to her."

"If ever a man was wasted," said Maud, "it's poor Jerome. Of course he has some compensation by being a huge success in business but he has no personal life."

"That's not her fault. She must suffer. Mentally if not physically."

"No, she makes quite a thing out of being an invalid. There are worse things than being idolized by a man without having to work for it. If she hadn't been hurt, she never could have held Jerome Tarrant."

"Why not?"

"If she had been well she would have had to compete," said Maud, "do her part socially. She would have had to stand up to comparison with other women. And she really hadn't the capacity. Helen was very pretty as a girl, one of those beautiful dolls that happen. But I went to Country-Day with her and, to put it mildly, we all knew that she wasn't very bright. She never could have kept up with Jerome. As it is, she doesn't have to. She's excused. She's like an exquisite piece of cracked Dresden on the shelf, to be admired and very carefully handled but not for ordinary use. And Jerome sits at home and looks at her."

"He seems to feel responsible for the crack in her," said Clare.

"I know. But anyone who knew Helen could have told him that she couldn't handle a gun. He wasn't to blame. Didn't you like him?"

"Very much."

"You must have been fun for him," said Maud. "Look, once in a while he comes in for a drink with father and me. He never stays for dinner because Helen would be alone—that's why I've no patience with her, you'd think she herself would insist on his going out more. I'll ask him to come about five tomorrow and you come too—"

So it began to happen. When Jerome Tarrant was going back to his wife, exactly on time, he said to Clare, "You were good enough to say that I might call on you and the little girl. Would Sunday afternoon be possible? My wife has to rest from four to six —"

On Sunday afternoon he met a pretty little girl in a sailor suit. He had no skill with children and Julia answered his

questions, looked at her mother as if she were puzzled or disappointed, and went out to find the woman called Martha.

There was never a time after that for years when Jerome Tarrant was not aware of Clare's arrivals and departures from St. Ives. She would find the house full of flowers when she came. He would drive her to the train when she went away. They would discuss what to do if he was coming to New York, what play to see, where to dine. Sometimes by good luck their engagements would place them in Chicago for part of a day. The conversations soon ceased to be impersonal.

"But I couldn't hurt Helen."

"I wouldn't want you to, Jerome. It's not in your nature to hurt people. You'd destroy yourself."

"I'm all right."

"I never realized what I was missing all these years."

"Jerome, I don't want anything except what belongs to us."

* * *

The flag they flew above their relationship, which must be kept so exceptional and decent, was Clare's independence. She never let Jerome buy a train ticket for her. Or pay a hotel bill she had incurred. The thousands of flowers, the theatres and dinners, the wine and caviar—those were all right. And finally she kept the watch in spite of its diamond setting, because it was Christmas and she couldn't hurt him.

She chose her clothes for Jerome. He increased her expenses because she wanted to be beautiful, and also because if they happened to meet in Chicago she would take a hotel suite so that he could call on her. Sometimes he would fly in from New York or St. Ives.

Walking along the boulevard towards her hotel in Chicago one night Clare could see the Lindberg searchlight swinging across the sky. Searching for my love, she thought. She felt strangely light and happy as if she were different from other

women, because she was so loved. She wore a suit of grey silk with a group of rare little orchids on one shoulder, for which Jerome had telegraphed. She never wore a hat and Jerome had come to like that. Her hair gleamed. She felt conspicuous, and with more than beauty, a lucky, happy woman.

Even the elevator man smiled at her.

"It's a treat to see someone who's happy," he said.

"It's wonderful to be happy," said Clare.

"We like to have you in the hotel," he told her, "the boys all say so."

But when, because it was funny and sweet, she told Jerome about the incident, he frowned.

"Pretty fresh."

"He was trying to be friendly."

"I suppose they don't miss a trick——"

"I'm sorry I mentioned it."

"I don't like that sort of thing."

"If you feel like that, Jerome, maybe we'd better not see each other any more. It's far better to stop right here if you're going to worry and be embarrassed."

"Darling, I'm only thinking of you. I want to take care of you."

There were endless arguments and persuasions. They were sure that no one had ever explored their vein of emotion before. They had discovered it, staked it out, had the only claim. There were the days when they felt brave and noble. And there were tawdry hours.

After the first two years, the fact that they cared for each other could not pretend to be their secret. Clare's associates in New York took it for granted. Many of them met Jerome and he no longer held them suspect as he had at first. They all liked him. It amazed Clare that men of such different ways of life admired Jerome, as if his kind of masculinity was what each of them coveted. Even Claude Gregory and Jerome became friends in spite of the age gap between them.

"Well, boy, how's it going?" Jerome would ask Claude

and in the commonplace statement there would be an interest to which the young man responded with gratitude.

In St. Ives also, perhaps because of the staunch chaperonage of the Sothern family, the attachment was accepted. As Clare took more part in local society, Jerome Tarrant was usually asked to parties where she would be present and he always was at her side.

Gradually Jerome Tarrant began to abate his habit of exclusive devotion to his wife, and alter the way of living which had made him as well as her almost a recluse. He surrounded her with no less luxury and comfort but he commenced to delegate his own companionship with her to nurses. To his surprise and peace of mind, he found that it made little difference to the invalid.

"Sometimes she doesn't seem to care," he told Clare, "whether I'm there or not."

Slowly he released himself. Clare made no suggestions. She knew they must come from him.

"Helen has changed," he said. "It doesn't seem to be anything that is physical, nothing the doctors can put a finger on."

You see her more clearly, thought Clare. You see it's Dresden, as Maud said.

"I used to wish," said Jerome, "that Helen would make more effort but I've about given up on that. And of course she has to be protected from ordinary contacts. She's so confined that any germ, even a bad cold, could be serious."

Clare never saw Helen Tarrant and did not know whether she was changing or not. But she saw the change in Jerome himself, the almost boyish delight in company, in small or large social pleasures, if Clare would share them. He had unused talents as a host and found places to use them. Some people looked askance at the couple but there was considerable argument. Others thought it was a wonderful relationship. Some called it so sad.

It couldn't go on. But it did.

"What is there really between those two?"

"He's hopelessly in love with her."

"What's there in it for her?"

"Do you think they're just friends?"

"You have to hand it to Jerome Tarrant. He's wonderful to his wife."

"It won't last. Those affairs never do."

"She's wasting her life. I should think she'd break it off."

She could not break it off. Sometimes in furious determination Clare would try. She would be hurt or shamed for reasons she would not admit. For she had promised herself—and Jerome—that her lack of defined place in his life would never make her resent him. She could not keep that promise. Jerome had vowed that if ever he made her unhappy he would drop out of her life. That was the promise he could not keep.

His letters would repeat it all over, yet to both of them it seemed new when he wrote the words again. He was often troubled.

Dearest—It is so wrong for you to be carrying this load alone. I should be with you to look after you, to see that you rest, to keep you from loneliness and to be near to take every burden and responsibility that a man can take—all we can do now is to be sure of each other—

They were inspired with happiness by each other.

My darling—It is a grand morning, warm and clear here and feels like the opening of spring. The first thing I saw was a letter from you. It really glowed, there on my desk in the office, and I drove everyone out of the room so I could read it alone and be happy.

Julia grew older. She was a handsome, competent little girl. She was in her last year at the Country Day High School when suddenly, quite unexpectedly, Helen Tarrant died.

In spite of all the protection and shielding she had been given, or perhaps because it had lowered her slight resistance too far, an epidemic of influenza which had spread through St. Ives penetrated her rooms. Jerome was summoned home from a business trip and by the time he reached there, his

wife had pneumonia. Specialists fought for her life as if it were of infinite value and finally Jerome told Clare on the telephone—with the satisfaction of a good man—"I guess we've got the thing licked."

Two days later he called again from St. Ives. Clare had to be traced by the operator. She was finally called out of a cocktail party for a best-selling writer to answer the telephone. The words came to her unbelievably.

"Helen died at six this morning. Her heart gave out. Suddenly. It was quite peaceful."

"Oh, Jerome—are you all right? "

"Yes. Dazed, I guess. Poor thing."

"Jerome—don't blame yourself. Not for anything."

"I'll have to take over here for a while."

"Of course. Don't give anything else a thought."

"But Clare—I love you."

"I know—not now——"

"Don't forget me."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE nurse studied her good looks in the mirror in her bedroom. She loosened her auburn hair just a little under its curves, and then took the stopper out of a bottle of JOY and touched her ears with it. Sometimes scent was the first thing that made a man conscious of a woman and could lead to a desire for her. She had read that somewhere. And Henry Cowper himself had given her the perfume, although he did not know it.

When he had come back from Washington this time, he had brought no present for his wife, nor for the nurse, though he usually did so. Mrs. Merrill had been disappointed. But she did not let the omission stand. It was easy to mention to Henry Cowper that his wife seemed a little more melancholy than usual and Mrs. Merrill said that she thought "because invalids dwell on such little things, Mr. Cowper, that it was because she hoped that you would bring her some little token when you returned home. She doesn't realize that a busy man like you can't always take the time." That was to prevent his forgetting presents next time.

But it had worked out even better. Henry said he had been too hurried to shop. Then he had taken a large bill out of his wallet and said, "Mrs. Merrill, when you go out could you pick something for Mrs. Cowper? Just say it's from me

and that I forgot to give it to her. And if there's anything left over, get something for yourself."

There was enough money left over for a small bottle of JOY. It is advertised as the most expensive perfume in the world, thought Mrs. Merrill as she corked it tightly. That man would give anything to a woman who handled him right.

He had told her when he returned to get a substitute and take a holiday, if she wanted to. But Mrs. Merrill had not gone away. There was no place where she could be quite so comfortable as in this large, wasteful house and she did not want Henry Cowper to begin to rely on any other nurse. She wanted him to consider her indispensable.

He might have been hurried on his last trip but Mrs. Merrill believed that wasn't the only thing that had happened to him. She had never seen her employer in his present mood. There was an almost angry force in him since his return. He followed the same routine at home but in a different and more detached way. He was grim, and the nurse thought she knew the reason for it. His little New York affair had blown up. That must be why there wasn't a smile left in him.

There was additional evidence in things she had heard. Tom Benson, who was a salesman in the office, had told his wife—she was a cousin of Mrs. Merrill—that Cowper was a hell-driver in the office lately. It figures, thought the nurse.

She crossed to the desk in what had been the guest room of the house. It was still a pleasant room but she often thought of what could be done to improve it. The whole house could stand redecoration for that matter. Lifting the blotter she picked up a clipping cut from a news magazine the other day. It was titled OUR HONOURABLE CONGRESSWOMAN and the face of Julia Rood stood out as handsomer than any other. Mrs. Merrill stood there wondering if the letter and clipping she had sent had been responsible for breaking up the affair. Of course one couldn't be sure. But she congratulated herself on sending it. Those women who thought they were better

than anyone else, always getting their pictures in the paper, ought to be made to realize that other people knew they weren't so smart and holy as they pretended to be. Tom Benson had found out pretty soon who the girl was. If Mrs. Merrill had known her address—but it was better perhaps to have sent the thing to the mother. Certainly something had happened to make Henry Cowper act like a bear with a sore head. He'd get over it. A little snip of a society girl with no morals wasn't good enough for him.

Sylvia Cowper ought to be in an institution. She was never going to be any better and she'd be a whole lot worse as time went on. The expense of the way he was taking care of her was fantastic. If he asked my advice, if he came to me about it, thought Mrs. Merrill, I could help him. I know some quite good places. But he doesn't realize that what he needs is a woman's help. She sighed, smiled at the perfection of her teeth, considered in one sweeping thought her age, the scarcity of husbands, and the necessity of not being fool enough to miss the best chance she might ever have. Back to the salt mines, she told herself, but not for ever, conscious of carrying the odour of JOY.

In Sylvia Cowper's bedroom she opened a window slightly and asked, in a way which promised to ignore whatever response might be made, about her patient's comfort.

"And how do we feel this evening?"

There was no answer. Automatically the nurse went to the bedside and took the pulse.

"You've had a good nap. You shouldn't still be sleepy," she said cheerfully, and then frowned at a suspicion and went into the adjoining bathroom. She picked up a bottle, poured out the pills and counted them, put them back again. Then she moved several bottles and boxes to another cabinet which had a lock. She locked them up and put the key in her pocket.

"Those are mine!" said Sylvia Cowper. She had stumbled out of bed and stood in the doorway swaying.

"Now, let's not get excited." The nurse led her firmly

over to the chaise-longue, and went through motions of care and comfort. "Did you take another pill while I was gone, Mrs. Cowper?"

"No," said Sylvia Cowper, "no!"

But she had. That was sure. The count showed it.

"We must never take more pills than our doctor tells us. We must just take what our nurse gives us every day."

"If I have a baby I'll be out of everything," said Sylvia, "and there are so many parties."

You're in fine shape for parties, Mrs. Merrill said to herself, and went down to the kitchen for the supper tray.

"Is there some maple cream left? She's cross tonight."

"You know where it is if there is any," said the cook. "I'm getting his dinner. Not that he cares what he eats any more."

"Mr. Cowper does seem over-tired lately. Of course he has such important things on his mind. He may need vitamins."

"Needs more than vitamins," sniffed Sarah, "with her the way she is. And a house like a tomb."

"You're well paid for working in it, Sarah."

"There's others better paid for less work," muttered the cook.

The servants had been eating the maple cream put away for Mrs. Cowper. There was hardly a tablespoonful left. Mrs. Merrill noted that without comment.

"Is Mr. Cowper home yet?"

"Ben's gone down for him."

Mrs. Merrill carried the tray upstairs, mentally reorganizing this household, and enjoying a dream of firing and hiring. She was listening for the car as she urged her patient to eat her supper, and brushed off her confused complaints and fears.

"You mustn't talk like that, Mrs. Cowper. You're a very fortunate woman, it seems to me. A lovely home and a husband who can't do enough for you."

"He's in New York."

"No, he isn't, he came back three weeks ago. Don't you remember dear? And I think I hear the car coming now. He'll be in for a little visit in a few minutes."

She rearranged the covers and said, "Now we must do our best to be cheerful." She herself met Henry Cowper with a smile which promised not to fail him when he came into the room twenty minutes later.

"Everything all right?" he asked in that new, controlled but tense voice. "How are you tonight, Sylvia?"

His wife would not answer. Henry went closer and asked, "Did you have a good supper?"

"She hides my things," said Sylvia venomously.

"Now, we know that's not true. We only put away things that might not be good for us," said Mrs. Merrill.

"Take it easy, Sylvia. I'll be up later on."

Outside the door he said to the nurse, "What's on her mind?"

"I locked up her sleeping pills. You know——"

"Yes, for God's sake be careful about that! I suppose they give her the only peace she gets but we've had a couple of bad sessions when she overdid those things——"

"I know. I'll take care of it, Mr. Cowper. Don't worry."

Another tasteless, lagging evening began for Henry. He ate what was put before him and went into the little study that adjoined the living-room. News and business magazines were piled on a rack beside the chair where he always sat. He tried with determination to fill his mind with their comment and speculation. He must leave no chink for any prohibited thought to enter his mind.

Extraordinary how these investments were coming up in the present market. If I had been able to put in more money earlier, thought Henry, I'd be on the way to being independent. If I could have bought at forty. It's a hundred now and will split soon. Of course I couldn't spare the money at the time. Even if I could have—what's the difference? I'm not going to that meeting in New York that Yost is calling. I don't want to go down there now. Better not. I can make some

excuse. They'll get along without me. They have my report and it speaks for itself.

"Excuse me, Mr. Cowper."

He looked up and saw the nurse. "Anything wrong upstairs?"

"No. Our little lady is fast asleep. I was just wondering if it would disturb you too much if I turned on the television in the living-room. There's a documentary that I'd so much like to see. Since Mrs. Cowper turned against TV I don't have much opportunity to look at it," she said with bright uncomplainingness.

"Good heavens, of course I don't mind. Use that thing in there whenever you want to, Mrs. Merrill. Make yourself at home."

She came over to pick up a paper that had dropped to the floor and placed it neatly beside him. The scent she wore drifted to him. He thought—why do women use that stuff? Belinda never does. She's so clean, so natural, so beautiful—

He put down the magazine he was trying to read and hunted in the pile for a more absorbing one. They all looked alike to him. Through the doorway he could hear a confusion of voices on the television and see the nurse, her red head catching the light. Henry got up restlessly and she was aware of it on the instant.

"The programme's just coming on. You might enjoy it, Mr. Cowper." She was thinking, if he does come in to watch it, I might suggest making a highball for him. I won't take one myself. Though there's no reason why not. If he once gets used to a little woman in the evenings when he's home, it would be the best thing in the world for him. No one ever comes in any more. One thing leads to another.

She smiled up at him in a companionable way but saw that Henry was staring past her at the television screen. The caption read: *The facts revealed in this picture are based on research done by editors of a certain magazine. Their current article on abortions tells the story that is pictured here.*

"I hope the subject doesn't shock you, Mr. Cowper."

Henry was thinking of Belinda in the Oak Room at the Plaza. He could almost see her, hear her saying to Bob Sheldon, "Right now I'm getting statistics on abortion." She had said it so simply, without any embarrassment. He thought, Belinda was never embarrassed. Or afraid. There she was in the station with her head up, waiting to see me off that night. Or to go with me. And I left her. I ran away. I let them scare me, lick me, give me orders about my life, my love. Now I'm afraid to go back to New York because I couldn't keep away from her. I know I couldn't. I don't intend to. And I'll tell that to Yost or anyone else.

"Let me try another station," said the nurse, "I really don't care myself——"

"No, don't change it," said Henry, coming back to where he was. "I am sure it's good stuff. But I'm going out for a walk."

What had got into him? He's restless as a wolf, the nurse said to herself. Can he be afraid of himself? And me? Already? Of course he must be sex-starved——

Henry came back for a minute, wearing his coat.

He said, "I'd better tell you. I'm leaving for New York tomorrow, Mrs. Merrill."

"Again?"

"Yes. You'll have to take charge here."

He was out of the house before she could decide on her next move. His tone had made her unsure of her previous tactics. He sounded as if his mind was made up. If she threatened to leave, would he call the registry and let them send another nurse? Or had he made up his mind to put his wife in an institution if she did leave? He must not do that yet. I'd better keep things on an even keel here for a while longer, thought Mrs. Merrill. He'll be back again before long. He has to come, with her the way she is. But the ice is broken now. I'll sit down here with him in the evenings after this.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HENRY did not telephone Belinda before he took the plane for New York. Nor from Idlewild. Words over a wire were not enough. He had hurt her too much last time with that device and he distrusted it. He must bring what he had to say to her, tell her face to face. When the thought came that she might not want him now, he would say desperately to himself—but at least I shall see her. I'll know that she is there, if she looks sad or tired, what dress she is wearing. But she might not be home. Then I'll wait, go back again in an hour. I'll go back until I find her. I can call her office. I'll telephone Mrs. Tarrant if I have to. Someone will know where she is and must tell me.

At seven o'clock the taxi left him at the door of her apartment house and sped away. Henry's mouth was set, his lips dry. He glanced at the row of mailboxes. There it was. Her name, Belinda Rood. He rang.

She wore a blue shirt, cut like a boy's. Her cheeks were hollowed more deeply, her forehead as serene. Her hair fell in the waves he remembered. When she saw him, she closed her eyes unbelievably.

"Oh my darling—oh Belinda——"

"I didn't know it was you. I didn't think it would ever be you."

"It had to be. This can't go on. I've done everything wrong. But from now on you will always come first. Always. Belinda, do you still care? A little——"

Her smile wavered at that foolishness.

After a little they were comforted. The surprise and shock was delight and they could do small things, like laughing and exulting over not having missed each other, because she had planned to go out in half an hour.

"But you won't go now? "

"I don't have to. How long can you stay? "

"I've a plan. I'll tell you."

"It must be a good one. You're different, Henry. You're happier."

"Things are going very well with me. I'm with my love again."

"And not bothered? "

"Never that again, my darling."

"Your wife? "

"She's about the same. No better. Whatever we do doesn't matter to her now. It never will. I've known that for a long time. I've been worrying about keeping up a false front. A phony reputation. When I took a long look at myself finally I didn't like the guy I saw."

"I always did."

"You'll like me better from now on."

"And how is your work going? "

"We'll talk about that day after tomorrow. Or the day after that. If we can spare the time. Now where would you like to go? "

"For dinner? "

"And breakfast."

Her eyes grew larger, darker.

"Linda," he said gently, "will you go away with me for a little while? Do you remember the night that we were in the railway station and you pretended that we were going away together? "

"My exciting, happy dream——"

"It is going to come true. Let's go—right now."

"People would know."

"A few people perhaps. But our lives belong to us. I wish I could promise that we wouldn't have to come back, Linda. But I shall have to. I have to earn money, pay the bills, take care of things out there—there's no one else to do it. You wouldn't like it if I didn't. But I shall never leave you, not again, even when I can't be with you. Do you understand that to be true? It's not enough for you—they'll condemn me and that's all right—but no man ever offered a woman a deeper love than I have for you——"

"It's all I want. Henry, without you I'm not a real person. I'm not myself. The machinery goes on. I breathe. But I don't feel—I've tried and I can't. Now I've come to life again—where are we going?"

"Where would you like to go?"

"Could we find the spring?" asked Belinda. "I know where it is now, south, below the mountains. I would like to go to a place where I have never been before—do we have to know where we are going?"

"I thought we might rent a car."

"Could we?" she asked rapturously. "Won't it cost too much? I have some money, but not very much——"

"Hush," he said, "nice girls don't think about money."

"All right—watch me cling—but we couldn't do it, Henry. They—back where your wife is—they have to know where you are and they wouldn't if we went off like that. They might need you."

"I fixed that," said Henry. "I told my secretary—she's a good woman and I can trust her—that I might be travelling and asked her to keep in touch with the house every day. I'll call her—that's the arrangement. I didn't want to call the nurse. She's too—something or other. But she's good at her job. Anyway, that's arranged. Don't think of it. You get your things packed. I'll pick up my bag at the hotel—I didn't even register because I hoped—and I'll get us a car—any particular colour?"

"Yellow as a daffodil!"

"Yellow it will be. I'll be back in an hour."

At the hotel Henry also sent a telegram to Mr. P. L. Yost, President, The Victor Company. He wrote it quickly and with decision.

* * *

"This is the best breakfast yet," said Belinda.

Henry looked at her plate and grinned. "Breakfast with you is a theory, not a meal."

"It's a bridge," she said, "between the night and the day. The view from it can be beautiful."

"Is it beautiful this morning?"

"Very. I pity so many of the breakfasts in the world. In dark rooms under electric light. Silent breakfasts. Men bent over plates, hating to look at the day ahead. Women drinking bitter coffee to forget last night."

"I guess it's like that for a lot of people."

"And here we are. You look wonderful this morning."

"I should."

"We've had ten breakfasts," said Belinda. "Do you remember the first one?"

"I certainly do. When we ran away from the motel early and drove fifty miles before we found a place that was open for breakfast?"

"But it was wonderful. That big-handed woman juggling the bacon, and the radio roaring. And the next morning we were eating in style at the hotel in Roanoke with old Uncle Tom bringing in the hot cakes. And three mornings in Mountain Manor—two rainy ones, they were fun too—one morning I stayed in bed and you brought me coffee and orange juice——"

"Was that all I brought?"

"No—not all. I just mention the unessentials. And then there was the breakfast in the place near Danville. It wasn't

so bad as you thought it was. Anyway it made us appreciate the breakfasts we've had here. Four of them."

"Do we have to go today?"

"We decided on today."

Henry pushed away his cup. He said, "I know. But how am I going to know you're all right? That you're not going to have a baby?"

"Would it seem so dreadful to you?"

"It would be the most wonderful thing in the world if it were possible. But it mustn't happen to you. Of course there isn't more than an outside chance."

"Not more than a chance," said Belinda. "Henry, we were never going to be frightened again."

"I know. I'm not really. It won't happen. But I'd like to stay with you until we're sure."

She shook her head. "It was only going to be a week. Staying longer won't make it easier."

"And I have to find a job," said Henry. She knew all about that now. He had told her everything that had happened as the yellow car sped along the highways, its top flung back. They had faced consequences and penalties in those unfamiliar rooms which had felt like homes and which they would never see again.

"You're sure of that?" she said.

"Oh yes. They can't do anything else. They'll have to put in a new man. They need Senator Hume's support too much."

"It's going to hurt."

"Nothing can hurt me very much as long as you love me, Linda."

"Then you'll never feel a pang." .

She said it lightly. She had made it possible for him not to suffer with worry about his work in these ten days. Yet she understood the seriousness of it and that was a wonderful way of companionship. He had never thought a woman could be like that.

"Let's have a last look at the dogwood tree before you load the car," she said.

The white-pillared inn was spread over its grounds in an easy wasteful way and here Belinda had found spring in full bloom. There were flowering bushes everywhere, azaleas flaring, mountain laurel turning pink, and dark lilacs. And there was a dogwood tree, perfect in form and set off by itself. From their bedroom at night they could see it brightened by the moon. Now in sunlight it was shining white.

Belinda touched a blossom, not breaking it off.

"The tree on which they crucified Christ," she said, "and after all the cruelty and injustice and suffering—and sin, whatever that is—there was this."

* * *

Mr. Yost tapped the ends of his fingers together. He moved the ankle of one of his crossed legs slowly about within the elastic sides of his old-fashioned shoes. Yet he gave the effect of judicial quiet. He waited for Henry to speak.

"I want to say first, Mr. Yost, that I appreciate all you have done for me. I wish there were some way to show my gratitude. I've been honoured to have a place in your company and I've enjoyed the work and the association with fine men. But——"

Mr. Yost offered no help.

"The thing is," said Henry, "that I feel that a man's personal life is his own affair and responsibility. A man has to decide for himself what he is justified or right in doing."

Mr. Yost tapped his fingers faster. "Within the law," he remarked.

Henry said stiffly, "There's nothing to be gained by a discussion of my personal situation."

"What else is there to discuss?" asked Mr. Yost.

"Well," said Henry, "as to that, I can only say that I felt Senator Hume's interference with my private life was unjustified. I thought at first I could come to terms with it. I could not. It not only seemed very cowardly on my part

but it involved other things, other obligations that I could not overlook."

"Hume is your wife's uncle, isn't he? "

"Yes. I can understand how he must feel about her condition. It's an appalling thing. But except in marrying her, which she desired as much as I did, I am not to blame for her—illness. Nor was she. The doctors tell me that it was probably inevitable. If I've left a stone unturned to bring Sylvia back to normality, I don't know where it is."

"Very sad," said Mr. Yost without emphasis.

"Senator Hume does not understand the situation. He believes, or pretends to believe, that I could change it by—well, by a normal domestic life. That's not true. My wife is a prey to obsessions. She hardly knows me. I have given her every protection and care that is in my power and I'll always continue to do so. I can't give her what she doesn't understand or want—or what isn't in me to give."

He stopped for a minute.

"What did Hume want you to do that you are not doing? "

"He's probably told you."

"I would rather hear it from you."

"Very well, sir. He was aware of the fact that I have a deep attachment—that I love——" Henry gave the word its full value—"another woman. Who loves me. There is nothing cheap, nothing ephemeral in what we feel. I have never honoured any person as I do her. Senator Hume is acquainted with her family. He issued an ultimatum that I was not to see the person I mention again. If I did so, he would withdraw his support from the Victor Company. I was insulted and greatly troubled. I have a real devotion to your company, sir. I tried to submit my feelings to his orders. It's not been possible. And since that is the case, I came in this morning to hand in my resignation."

"You are resigning."

"Of course."

"May I ask what you intend to do? "

"Well, I'll have to find another job. I've no prospect of

anything like the connection I had here but I've a good deal of technical training and it ought to be worth something. Enough to take care of my responsibilities, I hope."

"You will continue to be under the burden of great expense?"

"Naturally," said Henry, "there's no one else to assume it. My wife has no money of her own. That was one of the considerations which made me give in to Senator Hume's demands. But I'll make out all right."

"Pardon me for asking," said Mr. Yost, and his voice was courteous, "but do you intend to support two establishments?"

"There will be no question of that," said Henry.

"In spite of the great affection you bear for the lady."

"Belinda," said Henry slowly, using her name for the first time in conversation, perhaps because Mr. Yost's tone now made it possible, or perhaps because it made the decision so personal, "wants nothing from me which she believes to belong to my legal wife. She is like that. She thinks that we must not continue to see each other even at intervals, nor at all unless there is a serious reason for our meeting. She wants me to provide for my wife—to do my best to maintain a decent household—and I have promised to do what she wishes—she sees very straight."

"She does indeed," said Mr. Yost gravely.

The men were silent for a moment. Then Henry stirred himself for departure.

"Now just a minute," said Mr. Yost, "no rush, is there? About this resignation. I don't think I can go along with that, Henry. We need you."

"I'd only be a liability, sir, as things stand. You'd get no support from Senator Hume."

"Oh, I'm not so sure of that. He wants to make a showing, you know. He can't make the best one unless he deals with us. In any case, I don't like to see a man throw his weight around like that and get away with it. I've never liked a bully. I think we can weather Hume's annoyance, Henry,

without sacrificing one of our men because he didn't knuckle under to the Senator."

"You don't mean that, sir."

"I do indeed, Henry. I know a good man when I see him. I can spot a playboy or weak character. There's no one like that in this room. You've had a rough time, Henry, and I fear it isn't going to be any smoother in some respects. But for my part, I trust your judgment to do what's right—or should I say the young lady's judgment and your own?"

Henry stood up, turning away. He couldn't speak for a moment.

But he heard Mr. Yost say, "You know Mrs. Yost thinks very highly of you, Henry."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TO Julia Rood the world was a great jig-saw puzzle which could and would be solved when every small piece was finally in its right place. She was sure that she knew how the world picture would look when all the pieces were correctly fitted together. She never forgot the image of the big picture, as she worked on the small bits of it which it was her personal duty to match in colour and shape. Describing it to an audience, with all the conviction she felt, gave her public talks great inspirational value.

Politics gave her the ingenious task she loved, of making laws and policies which fitted into still empty spaces in the national life, which in turn must be joined eventually to matching parts in other nations. There was, she knew, always the chance that a reckless and evil hand would scatter all that had been done so far, and then the pieces would have to be picked up and put together again, if that was possible. If there were any survivors competent to do it. Julia Rood could describe the destructiveness of war with a vehemence that might leave a group of women trembling. Her fervour was real, for it stemmed from the fact that war had killed Paul Rood and scattered the pieces of her own life. She had been trying ever since to put them together but the pattern was never quite right. For one thing, her own child did not seem to fit in anywhere.

Julia believed in order, in law and in God. She had always been orderly, as an only child brought up with none of the confusion of family life about her was almost bound to be. Orderliness had fused at an early age with morality. From her first year in Sunday School, the moral code she was taught had given Julia a kind of comforting companionship which she got from no other source. God loved her when she did a good deed, and she greatly wanted love.

Later, in the splendid days when Paul had loved her, Julia had believed that they always would work together on the puzzle of the world. She wanted him to get the credit for solving much of it. He had laughed at that ambition and teased her and occasionally wooed her away from her earnestness. Then he had gone away to fight and been killed. So much was left undone on the puzzle, and Julia was so convinced of what Paul would have done if he had lived that she could not let his work go unfinished.

Though she treasured Belinda, she could not in conscience give the child all her time. It was wrong, it was lazy to stay in a little flat, waiting for a child to wake up from her nap. Julia was duty-driven to get back to work on the great jigsaw puzzle, so that the world would be a better place to live in, for her own Belinda and uncountable millions of other children. She could bring tears to the eyes of many listeners—and also she could sublimate her own loneliness—by saying that was what she was trying to do, and thoroughly believing it.

When Belinda was old enough she would work on the puzzle too. Julia Rood took that for granted for years, because she had always kept telling and showing Belinda how important it was. She was careful to have Belinda study the right subjects in school. There was a world map on the wall of her bedroom. There were educational visits to the Capitol, the Supreme Court and other places where history was being made.

They made a charming public picture, mother and daughter, when Belinda was in her teens, and were often photographed

together. Julia knew the value of personality and good looks in the political world. As she became more important, it was possible to have her daughter included in groups that were not easy of access. But Belinda's curious indifference to invitations that should have delighted any girl at first surprised her mother, and then caused her worry. She could not force Belinda to enjoy a party. Nor to stay in college for four years.

Belinda had eluded her mother's hopes and ambitions for her. It was Sue Fineman, Julia's secretary, who loved political life and was going to marry a young man in the State Department, probably destined for a brilliant career. Belinda had chosen to lose herself in unimportant work and inconspicuous places in New York. It was disappointing. It was a failure for Julia Rood, who was unused to failing. But the shattering thing had been the ruinous love-affair in which Belinda, not arguing about it and never quarrelling, eluded her again.

The public was Julia Rood's mirror. When she looked at it, it gave back the reflection of a woman who was handsome and feminine as a woman should be, a high-minded forward-looking leader, a devoted mother too. If Belinda had persisted in her affair with Henry Cowper, the reflection would never have been the same. It would be ridiculous and false, something to mock at, a reflection of a woman whose own house and family were not in order. What hurt Julia even more was that the lovely little girl who used to be photographed with her mother would disappear.

But on this April morning the Honourable Julia Rood was no longer troubled by fears of such a catastrophe. She was in the club car of a train on her way to New York for the rest of the day. Clare had asked her to come. There were papers to be signed in connection with some gifts of money that Clare wanted to make, and they were to meet at the law offices of Philip Merton at four o'clock to discuss and settle them. Clare is very good to do this, thought Julia gratefully. It will make a great deal of difference to me. I can go abroad

to the conference in Geneva. She is doing something for Belinda too. Belinda will be there today.

The thought of seeing her daughter gave Julia a lift of pure happiness. It was weeks since she had last seen Belinda. And Belinda always refreshed her. Thank God she was out of that mess. Clare was probably right. To say nothing about it might be best.

That had been Clare's insistent advice. She had taken a great weight off Julia's mind and heart when she telephoned several weeks ago and said that there was no need to be concerned about Belinda. Only a few days before that Belinda and Peter Sulgrave had both dined with Clare at the Merton house.

"But is she still seeing Henry Cowper?" asked Julia.

"I think they have decided that it will be better if they don't see each other any more," Clare answered, "and you should give him credit for this——"

"I can't give that man credit for anything!"

"All right, it doesn't matter. But Belinda is very sensitive, Julia. She's hurt and troubled and she will need time to let the thing heal—I would leave her quite alone for a few weeks if I were you. That's what I shall do. She can come here if she wants me. If you write to her or telephone, don't even mention Henry Cowper or say you're glad or anything, will you? It's very important to be careful about that. You'll remember?"

"You're sure they have broken it off?"

"I'm telling you just what she told me and Belinda hasn't a lying bone in her. But there's been nothing trivial about their feeling for each other, Julia. It's pathetic—it's sad. But she's a strong person."

"I know she is."

"And you won't try to discuss it with her?"

"No." Julia would have liked to discuss it gravely. But Clare was urgent. Julia said, "All right, I won't mention it. But it makes me so happy, Clare!"

The assurance had given new vitality and happiness to

Julia's recent weeks. She gave her undivided attention to her work, satisfied that Clare had charge of her daughter, as she so often had before. Julia went to Iowa to a week's conference of party workers and then had flown to the West Coast to give talks. She sent cards to Belinda and Clare but there was no time for letter-writing. When she returned to Washington she was caught up immediately in preparation for the debate on the educational aid bill. That was one of the pieces of the great puzzle which she was working on at the moment.

A man in a chair in front of her flipped the pages of his newspaper and Julia saw a column which she had read with satisfaction earlier in the day. It reported the talk which she had given yesterday in the House. The editors had given it unusual space, reprinting whole paragraphs of her speech, especially those referring to the indirect curbs that educational aid would put on crime and delinquency. The attendance in the House had been good and there had been considerable applause. Julia had confidence that yesterday's achievement and the work ahead of her were fitting together perfectly. She wondered if the New York papers had carried a report of her speech. If Clare had read anything about it, she would realize how vitally important it was for her to have no personal scandal in the family that might backfire on her public work.

* * *

The death of Mary Floyd had brought Clare within the orbit of grief and separation again. She had known it must happen soon. When the end came, shortly after the dinner at Philip Merton's house, what Clare herself felt most was pity that Mary had missed so much of the happiness a woman could have. Also it was the breaking of another tie. Clare was a little more alone in the world. But it was Claude Gregory who was deeply shaken and distraught. He too had known

that Mary's death must be expected. He had spoken of it calmly to Clare. But the actual impact of loss astonished him. His judgment trembled. He found it almost impossible to do his work. He turned to Clare for help.

"I feel so lost," he said, "not to be able to call her! I pick up the telephone—I forget—and there it is——"

Claude had an amiable wife and several grown children. But Clare could see that they were little help to him now. She realized that, wherever Claude's love-making might have been done, his deepest and most continuing emotional relation was to his work.

He asked Clare if she would read a manuscript.

"You'll know how Mary would react to this," he said rather pitifully, "I'm not sure. Could you find time to read it and give me an opinion?"

Clare said that she would, of course. It was not the sort of request that could be refused. But that was only the beginning. In the last weeks there had been other manuscripts and long discussions with Claude about the person who might be able to replace Mary. She could feel the pressure of his hope that she might do it herself. But Clare did not intend to allow that to reach a point of decision. It was too dangerous. She might find herself doing something she did not want to do, yielding to circumstances.

She had decided, after the night when Belinda had stayed with her at the hotel, that she wanted to make some financial provision for the girl immediately. Money was only money but it had its own mechanical ways of comfort. Belinda should have more pretty clothes. She should be free to take a vacation, to go to Europe. Also it was easier for a girl to consider marriage if she had a little income of her own. She would not confuse the issues.

When Philip Merton called Clare again, and he did call after a few days to suggest that they hear an opera together, she also made a business appointment with him. It had led to subsequent ones, as he explained various kinds of settlements. Clare felt the friendship between herself and Philip expanding

pleasantly. He had been wise and kind in advice about the money. He had been intelligent and a good companion at the opera. Clare found it restoring to go out with an escort of her own again. Also Philip made her feel younger and gayer with all his small gallantries.

The Wednesday on which Julia and Belinda were to meet her at Philip's office to hear about the money settlement had been complicated for Clare by a luncheon engagement with Lee Havighurst. It was actually an engagement made by Claude Gregory with Lee but the agent had begged Clare to take over.

"You talk to him," said Claude, "you could always handle Lee. If I tell him what we're up against with this book of his, he'll fight back. He'll take the attitude that I haven't tried to sell it. But he would listen to you."

"I doubt that. I'd do the listening."

"The point is that if he will co-operate—if he'll make the changes and cuts we want—we can at least get him a publisher and a small advance. I'm sorry for Lee but right now, Clare, I'm not sure I wouldn't blow up if he pulled his usual line of superior talent. You'll do it, won't you? I'll tell him you're helping us until we fill Mary's place. If ever that can be done. It's set up for one o'clock. Sign the check of course. It's business expense."

"I can't talk all afternoon to him. I'm meeting Belinda and Julia—she's coming over from Washington—that day at four o'clock."

"It won't take an hour—I'll be eternally grateful. I'll send the manuscript to your hotel so you'll have a chance to look at it before you see him. The changes we want are indicated. I went over them with Mary the last time I saw her. That's another reason——"

"I know," said Clare, aware of the cutting edge of such memories, "well, I'll do what I can."

Before she went to meet Havighurst at one o'clock, Clare made an effort to reach Belinda by telephone and recheck their appointment. But as usual there was no answer at the

girl's apartment and Clare could not get through to the magazine office. Belinda would meet them of course, she reassured herself. For Philip Merton had formally written both Julia and Belinda, stating the purpose of the meeting. Clare wanted to make it as impersonal as possible, though she had told Belinda something of her intention.

As they parted on the morning after Belinda had stayed at the hotel, Clare had said, "Come any time. Just walk in. I'm not going to be a nuisance on the telephone and on your trail constantly, Linda. You know I'm here and it's always lovely to see you. Anyway we'll have to get together before too long, because I'm concocting a little plan. Philip Merton is going to help me work out a way to see that you have more margin—with money, I mean."

"I don't need it, Clare."

"This is something Jerome meant to do. We talked of it."

"He did?" The special fondness for Jerome came into Belinda's voice.

"Yes."

"I hate having you lonely," said Belinda, "but you had so much, didn't you?"

"It's never enough when you love someone."

"I wish," Belinda said, "that I could have seen the spring with Henry—just one spring. We didn't even have a year of knowing each other."

Clare did not say anything for a minute. Then she went back to practical matters for safety. "Philip Merton or I will be in touch with you when we've worked this thing out. You'll come to his office if he sets a time, won't you?"

"Of course. Any time," Belinda had said.

She would be there and Clare had heard from Julia that she would come over by train. Clare walked to the familiar restaurant on 53rd Street, with the Havighurst manuscript under her arm. She had read it carefully and was sure that Claude and Mary had been quite right in their criticism.

Lee was a little late and Clare guessed that it was deliber-

ate, a pose taken so he would not appear to be anxious. He came in wearing his manner of careless celebrity, and gave her his smileless smile.

"What a break to have old Claude turn into a beautiful woman," he said. "How are you, darling?"

She said she was fine and they found the table.

"So you're back with the agency."

"No. Certainly not. I'm just filling in. Claude is snowed under with work and of course he's had a bad shock."

"Too bad about Mary. But I guess her number had been up for some time. I was down in Camden for the races or I would have been there to pay my respects."

Clare did not want to talk to Lee about Mary. She asked if he'd had a good time.

"It was gay. Those people are so horsey that it's a wonder they don't grow four feet. I drove down with someone who knows you, by the way. Lucy Drummond."

"I don't know the name."

"She says she met you. Her mother went to college with you."

"Oh yes," said Clare, "Jean Humber's daughter. I do remember that she mentioned you. Very chic, isn't she? Is that your age bracket now?"

His amused, satisfied look probably indicated that he was having an affair with Mrs. Drummond. Clare thought, a man can go into a younger generation on the romantic level, but a woman never can without becoming absurd.

"At sixty, good or never," quoted Havighurst, "which is certainly true of you, Clare. You seem far younger than that bitter almond of a woman, Lucy Drummond."

"From the little I saw of her, that's a good description," said Clare. "There are some very sharp ones in your novel too."

"You like it?" Though he tried to seem casual, he was so quickly eager that she was sorry for him. "How divine to have someone read a manuscript who does more than count the words to a page!"

"It's very skilful. You always are. But it can stand cutting, Lee. It's too long for the amount of action. I mean you can't afford to smother the plot because it is so slight."

"It has always seemed to me that it is the province of the author to decide whether he has written fully or not," said Havighurst. "You'll have another Martini?"

"No. I have too much to do this afternoon."

"Did Claude get the serial sale?"

"No. That market is pretty limited."

Havighurst beckoned for another drink. He said, "If Claude would make a different approach, he might get somewhere."

"Lee, he tried every possible magazine."

"In a lackadaisical way. He never has had any faith in my work. In spite of the fact that it was my first books that put your agency—now his, God help us—on the map."

"He doesn't forget that."

"I consider this novel the best thing I've ever done."

"*Whisper of Love* is still my pet."

"That novel doubled the circulation of *Home and Fashion* when they ran it serially."

"But that magazine has folded and so have a good many others. The reading public wants realism, character development, emotion. It's not content with good prose."

"Mary always said that I had a sixth sense for feeling. And she was quite right. I can tell how two people feel towards each other when they come into a room. The way a dog can hear a whistle that isn't audible to a man."

So he came back to Mary, still relying on her judgment. Clare remembered that Mary had thought that Lee had emotional intuition. But there had never been sympathy to go along with it, to extend it.

He asked, "Has my manuscript been shown to the people who buy for the network shows? Wouldn't they be interested?"

"TV networks don't pay large fees. And this is not their kind of material."

"Why not? I believe it would get an enthusiastic reaction from any large public."

His disappointment was hitting out in all directions. Clare wanted to be done with this job.

"Let's order," she said, "I'll have the cold salmon."

He gave the order, asked for another Martini and drank it rapidly.

"What has Claude come up with, for God's sake?"

"Well, Leland has made a tentative offer to publish the book."

"Leland—those carpet-baggers——"

"No, they're doing all right."

"Of course what they're after is an established name for their list. I don't know that I'd accept an offer from them."

"It's not definite. They want a good deal of cutting."

"That's out. Those upstarts can't butcher my work."

"I don't think it would be butchery. I went over the script last night very carefully and it seems to me that making the cuts brings out the values in the story. It will be a witty, literate, *tour de force*. And it will have more chance in this present market. Now look," she placed the manuscript between them on the table and began to turn the pages slowly, showing what could be left out, arguing each point.

"You can use the other material later," she said, looking up persuasively. He was sitting very close to her and to her surprise his cynical face was amused.

"You certainly haven't lost the knack," he said, "you still can charm a ship out of a bottle."

"But you see what I mean."

"I always have. You always used the methods of seduction."

She laughed. She too had felt the special skill with which she used to earn her living come back. "I guess it's like riding a bicycle," she said.

"Put the book away," said Havighurst, "no novel was ever improved by mayonnaise. No doubt you'll have your way in the end."

"And you'll be glad. I think you'll be happy with it."

"The old sweet song."

He ate rapidly and without speaking until the shell of the crab on his plate was empty. Clare was silent too. She was sorry for him. She thought of how long ago she had met him, when they were young in the Village, when she had thought he was wonderful in his first arrogance of talent.

"Yes—coffee," he said. What was he thinking now?

"Clare," said Havighurst, "will you marry me?"

"Now there's an idea."

"A good one, I think," he said, "I mean it. It's an offer. An offer of my recently resumed personal liberty and a name which is still recognized in the bookshops and a number of anthologies."

"This on three drinks?"

"Not at all. I've had this in mind since the night of our little dinner with Philip Merton."

"Oh come—you've just been off with Lucy Drummond."

"Well—nothing could have convinced me more of your own charm than a few days in the company of that eager-beaver widow. Clare, we could make a good thing of it."

"Let's not be silly."

"I'm not. I hope you won't be silly enough to close your mind to the idea. I've always had the greatest admiration for you, Clare. You must know that. And there have been recurrent gusts of desire over the years—a desire for you that has never been satisfied."

His dark ugly face was close. She could see the wear of life in its lines, the appraisal in the deep-set eyes that could never be trusted, the vain absurd little beard. And yet she felt an involuntary rise of pride, an irresistible wonder what it would be like—she could have this man for the taking. Had he really wanted her? Was she still desirable?

"We could have some brilliant years, Clare. I can't offer you money but I assume you don't need it. I'm not written out—you could help me——"

"Don't go on, Lee. If you're in earnest, stop it. I'd never marry again. I'll never consider it."

"Oh yes, you will. You considered it a minute ago."

Had she? She shuddered away from herself.

"Please, Lee, I came to lunch to talk over the novel. I think we have that pretty well talked out. You look over the suggestions and if there are some that you object to, I know that Claude will not insist—after all, it's your book——"

"Let's have a brandy."

"I can't. I have to go downtown for a business appointment. My daughter is coming over from Washington and she and Belinda and I have some things to settle with my lawyer."

"Is the beautiful Belinda back in town?"

"Back? She hasn't been away as far as I know."

"I just happened to spy her in a place outside of Baltimore where Lucy and I stopped for lunch."

"It wasn't Belinda."

"There aren't two of her. She looked extremely well," said Lee. "I didn't know the man with her. Not the sailor. But a handsome fellow."

"You must have her confused with someone else," said Clare, "but I don't know what we're arguing about. If it was Belinda, she was on some assignment for her magazine."

"She looked as if it were a happy assignment."

"What do you mean?"

"Only what I said. I like to see young people absorbed in happiness. Also older people. How is our friend Merton? Has he any new recipes?"

"Lee, you're obnoxious. I really must go."

But leaving him and hurrying could not destroy the confusion that he had made in her mind. And that was odd about Belinda. What if he had seen her? She had been on a job. No, he had been intimating something else. And Lee had a sixth sense for feeling. Clare stopped at her hotel and called Belinda's office once again, this time successfully.

"No, Miss Rood is not here today. She is still on vacation," said the voice at the information desk.

"Thank you," said Clare, feeling slightly sick.

* * *

When Clare arrived at the offices of Merton, Ply and Davis, Philip Merton was ready to see her. He chose a chair for her. It was covered with green leather that was softened with long use and she felt reassured and as if she had returned to respectability after an escapade.

"Belinda is coming, isn't she, Philip?"

"I wrote to her. I sent letters to both Mrs. Rood and Belinda, fixing the time. You've been in touch with them, haven't you?"

"Not with Belinda lately. I've been so busy and very often I can't reach her on the telephone. But if you wrote her and she knows the time, I'm sure she'll be here."

"You're being very generous, Clare. I know she will appreciate it."

"It's only what I should do. Jerome and I had talked of it but we put it off, because we thought she should find out what it's like to be on your own. What I'm giving Julia is the balance of what I got when I sold the agency. I never had to use all of it and it comes more or less from Julia's own father, because he was the one who started the business. But Belinda was Jerome's favourite, and three hundred dollars a month will give her some leeway."

"I'm arranging to transfer that annuity of yours to her. I hope you won't miss it."

"No—no—there's plenty for me."

"Yes, as things are with you now. Of course if you should need to provide for someone else, it would be different."

"There isn't anyone else."

Philip Merton smiled wisely. "In one way I am glad to hear you say that. An attractive woman—and one with considerable private means—is apt to be sought after."

Clare flushed, which was unusual. "Not at my age."

"You seem young to me. And Jerome's death must have left a great gap in your life."

"Yes. Of course I must do something. My former partner in the agency wants me to go back to work there."

"In an agency?"

"It's the only thing I'm trained for."

"But isn't that unsuitable? And unnecessary?"

"I don't know," she said, feeling the goose-girl for a second.

"Don't do anything hasty. I wish——" And then Julia Rood came in and there were cordial greetings.

"Belinda's not here yet?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"But she's coming, isn't she, Clare?"

"I expect so. The last time I saw her I told her I meant to do something about money and that she would be notified from Philip's office. She surely would have sent word if she couldn't make it. When did you write her, Phil?"

He glanced at the correspondence before him.

"On the fifteenth. A week ago."

Julia asked, "When did you talk to her, Clare?"

"Not recently. An old friend of mine died and I've been involved in things that kept me busy."

"Shall we call her? She may still be at the office."

"I did call there," said Clare, "an hour ago. They said she wasn't there today. The girl I talked to said that she was on vacation."

She had to say it, though she did not want to.

"Well, if she's on vacation," said Philip Merton, "she may not have received my letter."

"Vacation where?" asked Julia. "How long has she been away?"

"I don't know," said Clare, "I've been out of touch. I tried to call her a number of times."

What a fool I've been, thought Clare. Where had Lee seen her? In a place outside of Baltimore. Looking happy. He meant that she looked in love. It would only be Henry

Cowper. She hadn't stopped caring—she couldn't stop——

Julia exclaimed, "But I took it for granted that you were in touch with Linda!"

"She's not a child, Julia, she has her own life——"

Philip Merton said, "Well, if Belinda does not come, we can always make a later appointment for her. These two settlements which Clare so generously wishes to make are not connected with each other. I think we can go over the one which concerns Mrs. Rood now——"

But Julia was standing. "No," she said, "I'm very grateful but I don't want to talk about it now. I'm—concerned about Belinda. Something must have happened. I must find out. I have to go to her apartment, where she lives——"

"I'll go with you, Julia. I'm sorry, Phil. But Julia is upset—if we can postpone this——"

"Why surely," he said. "I can understand Mrs. Rood's apprehension. But these young people——"

"Sorry," said Clare again and touched his hand, then followed Julia, who was already ringing for an elevator.

"Don't worry, Julia——"

Julia turned a white accusing face to Clare.

"Where is my child?" she asked.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ONCE again Julia was asking the question, as if repetition could force an answer. They were now back in Clare's rooms at the Embassy after the fruitless errands on which Julia had insisted. They had gone to the office of the magazine and learned only that Belinda was on vacation. But the schedule of the personnel department was not available, and how long she had been away or when she would return was not known to the woman to whom they talked. Julia had controlled herself, tried to be casual.

They had gone to the apartment where Belinda lived and when there was no answer to her bell, Julia summoned the janitor.

"I don't know. Miss Rood is in and out," he said. "She's been away. Seems to me she got back a couple days ago but I couldn't say for sure. They come and go."

"Will you let us into her apartment?" asked Julia.

"Lady, I couldn't do that without Miss Rood's say-so."

"But I'm her mother," said Julia.

"I can't make no exceptions," he said, "you see if anything happened I'd be to blame."

So they had come back here and Julia was walking back and forth in the living-room, asking the same questions.

"But where is she? Why didn't she let me know? She has never done a thing like this before!"

"Julia, she was probably tired or had a touch of spring fever and wanted to get off by herself for a few days."

"You don't believe that, Clare! I don't either. She's gone off with that man."

"You have no reason to suppose that."

But I have, thought Clare as she spoke. She must not tell Julia what Lee Havighurst had said. She must protect both Belinda and Julia—from each other if it was necessary—if she could.

"Try to realize, Julia, that Belinda is a young woman—not a child or a schoolgirl any more. She's able to take care of herself. She has a great many interests and we don't know all of them or who her friends are or what may have come up——"

"That's verse her father used to say has been running in my head," said Julia.

"What verse?"

"About being born on the eve of spring. Belinda was. About being enchanted. That's what Henry Cowper did to her. Hypnotized her!"

"What was the rest of the verse?" Anything to divert her mind, thought Clare.

"I can only remember part of it." Julia stopped her pacing and said—"Like this——"

'She will stir in men a peculiar thirst
And in bees a curious fear
And in every March, on the twenty-first
She will suddenly disappear——'

She has disappeared. It was a joke—a game—oh, my God, this is so awful! It's true!"

"It may not be awful at all. And nothing can change the fact that she is a lovely girl——"

"She was once. Until the bad blood came out in her!"

"Bad blood?"

"I'm sorry," said Julia in a hard voice, "I've never brought it up until now. I never meant to. We look at things differ-

ently. You always did as you pleased. No matter what people said. And now it's come out in Belinda. Did you encourage her to do this? Why did you lie to me, tell me that they had broken it off?"

"I told you the truth. What Belinda told me. And why do you say I always did as I pleased?"

"Do you think I liked to have Jerome around our house before you were married? To see you get off the same train with him? And someone would say, 'Is that your father?' and know it wasn't."

"I didn't know anyone said that to you."

"You didn't care, did you?"

"Julia, I always did my best. Jerome and I loved each other for a long time. But there was nothing to be ashamed of in that. I never loved anyone else."

"If my father had lived, you wouldn't have been faithful to him?"

Her father, thought Clare. If Julia only knew of the infidelities of her father, his dislike of her conception—the long faithfulness was between me and Jerome. But I must not tell her. Let her have something to tie to, even if it's a delusion—she's in such trouble——

"I didn't know Jerome until long after your father died," was all she answered.

"Never mind. I don't want to talk about that. It doesn't matter. I've lived it down. All that matters is what to do about Belinda!"

"If you're going to worry to distraction, perhaps we should call the hospitals, or get in touch with the police."

"No! Then it would be all over the papers——"

"And there's the Missing Persons Bureau. But I'm afraid they would tell us to wait. She's not given up her job or her apartment. We don't know that she isn't on a holiday, that a letter hasn't miscarried, or a telegram been delayed. Julia, we must wait. And try to be calm. You'll undoubtedly hear from her soon."

"What am I going to hear?"

"That I don't know. But you're doing yourself no good by getting hysterical. You need something to eat. Or a drink."

"I couldn't eat. And you know I don't drink——"

"There are times when it's indicated——" Clare broke off the sentence for she heard someone coming into the entrance hall. She signalled to Julia that they could be overheard. Julia went rigid, standing like the statue of an avenging angel at the far end of the room. Clare turned her head. Was it a maid or a bellboy delivering a parcel? Then Belinda came in.

She spoke first. Julia seemed frozen and Clare was searching the girl's face.

"Hello, Clare, I must give you back your key. Oh hello, Mother, I'm so glad you're here. I hoped you might not have gone back yet. Clare, I rushed over here to ask you to forgive me. I only read that letter from Mr. Merton a few minutes ago and then I realized that the appointment with him was for today and that I'd missed it. I've been out of town until day before yesterday and the mail was piled up. I hadn't opened any of it until just now—I thought it was all bills and circulars and there were so many things I had to do first——" She stopped, as if conscious of a barrier heavier than silence. She tried to go on, "I'm so sorry, Clare. Please don't think I'm ungrateful. I suppose I've inconvenienced everyone——"

"Where have you been?" asked Julia. "You didn't tell me you were going away. Nobody knew where you were!"

When Belinda had come in, happiness was wrapped around her. Clare had seen it instantly, recognized it. This was not the unhappy girl who had spent a wakeful night here, nor the carefully mannered girl who pretended she would enjoy Philip Merton's dinner. She was not the same as she was when she had brought Henry Cowper to meet Clare. She was scented with happiness and more beautiful than ever, her bare head ruffled with wind and haste, her eyes growing darker as Julia demanded answer. Belinda with a quick gesture crossed her arms, hiding her breasts, her heart. She looked very young and vulnerable. She was begging them

not to spoil it, to let her have it. Clare felt that painfully.

"Where were you?" repeated Julia.

"South," said Belinda, "a place in the mountains. I'd never been there before—you've no idea how beautiful it is now. The redbud's out—and the dogwood——"

"Were you alone?"

Silence answered first. Clare did not know how long it was—it seemed long because she dreaded the exposure which she knew was coming—before Belinda said quietly, "No, Henry was with me."

"I thought so," said Julia harshly. "Have you lost your mind? Do you know what you've done? To yourself and to me? I shouldn't have trusted you—believed what Clare said. She told me that you had stopped seeing that man——"

Belinda turned swiftly to Clare, "When I told you that it was the truth, Clare. I didn't think this would happen. I didn't know that Henry was coming to New York. He didn't tell me beforehand. He had to come. For he couldn't leave it between us like that. You see they put pressure on him. It wasn't his decision, it was a kind of blackmail. He hated it. He couldn't live with it. And finally he knew what he had to do—what we should do—even if he did lose his job." Her face lit up again. "But he isn't going to lose his job."

"I'm not interested in Henry Cowper's job," said Julia, "he ought to be behind bars! But when I think of my daughter running around the country with a married man like a common——"

"Julia, control yourself——"

"Leave this to me, Clare. If she can do this sort of thing she can hear it described. I suppose you think you can get away with it, Belinda—I suppose you've picked up the kind of associates who think nothing of being promiscuous, who have love nests and——"

"Please——"

"People have been writing letters to me, taunting me with this affair of yours, telling me that you are Henry Cowper's mistress. God knows I didn't want to believe it. You can be

dragged into court—sued—I told you that but you paid no attention. How do you expect me to hold up my head, to have any public influence for good when my own daughter is living an immoral life——”

“I’m not living an immoral life, Mother.”

“Then what do you call what you’ve been doing? ”

“Love,” said Belinda almost under her breath but they heard the word.

“Belinda,” said Julia Rood, forcing a kind of composure, “I beg you to listen to me. I’m only thinking of your own good, your future happiness. You must not go on seeing this man.”

“I know. We know that, Henry and I.”

“Where is he now? ”

“In Chicago, I think.”

“Then he’s gone back to his wife? ”

“To his house.”

“Until the next trip, I suppose. And you are actually willing to be a travelling man’s mistress—practically a call girl——”

“Stop,” said Belinda. Her pride faced her mother’s anger. “Don’t say those things. Don’t think them. It’s not like that at all. I’m sorry you feel like this. I didn’t want to hurt you. Of course I wish it could be different. But it’s Henry I love, no matter what the situation is. Henry’s marriage is a tragedy. He has to take care of her—I want him to. But he never loved anyone until he loved me.”

“The old story——”

Clare winced. “Julia, don’t be so cruel——”

Julia lashed out at Clare. “I’m not surprised that you’d think it’s all right. You were just as bad. Or worse.”

“Never so forthright. Never so brave,” said Clare.

“And I hold you responsible, Clare—I begged you to help me stop this affair before it went this far——”

Belinda had turned to Clare again for understanding. “It’s different now, Clare,” she said. “When I was here, after Henry had telephoned from Washington that he wasn’t com-

ing back, I felt so helpless. I knew he was angry and defeated but I couldn't help him. He's not like that now. He can face anything. So can I. It's true that we aren't going to keep on seeing each other. We decided that's best. Especially for him. Unless he should be ill or badly hurt or something like that. Then I'd have to go to him. But not otherwise." She added as if to herself, "And I mean it."

"If I could believe that——" said Julia.

"It's true."

"God knows I hope so. You must have been out of your mind to run such a risk. Suppose you found you were going to have a child!"

Belinda said nothing.

"You are sure you're all right?" asked Julia. "That you aren't pregnant?"

Still Belinda was silent and the quiet in the room became ominous.

"Belinda——"

"Yes," said Belinda, "you'd rather I wouldn't lie, wouldn't you, Mother? I don't want to lie about this. I am going to have a child."

"Oh, darling, no," breathed Clare. Julia was frozen with shock.

"That's what I had to find out about today. I didn't go back on my job as soon as Henry and I came back. I didn't want to see a doctor until Henry had talked to the president of his company, and then I wanted to see him off without his having anything to worry about. But then I went to Brooklyn to see a doctor I know over there. That's why I didn't open my mail yesterday. I couldn't think of anything else until I found out. I was waiting—and it's really true—they can tell almost right away now——"

Her voice held nothing but joy.

"And Henry doesn't know this?" asked Clare.

"I don't want him to know now. He's going to be working very hard—it would worry him—and then—he might not be so happy about it as I am."

"No, I don't think he would be," said Clare.

Julia was looking at her daughter now as if she were a project.

"You can't be far along," she said.

"No. But the doctor is quite sure."

"Will this doctor take care of you?"

"When it comes?"

"Now, of course—the sooner the better—can you trust him? Is he reliable?"

"He's an obstetrician."

"Then will he get rid of it?"

"Get rid of it? What are you talking about?"

"You don't expect to go through with this? At this stage it won't be too dangerous if he's a good man."

"You mean—have an abortion?"

"But of course you must—what else can you do? The man's married. Even if he could get a divorce—and that would be a complete scandal—it would take too long—the child would be born too soon. Maybe this will be a lesson to you!"

"Clare——"

"To go through with it would be very difficult. And it's not fair to the child, Belinda," said Clare.

Belinda moved backward, as if the older women were dangerous or contaminating. But when she spoke it was quietly.

"I wish you both could understand," she said, "how happy I am about this. You see, Henry's wife can never have a child."

"That doesn't enter into this at all," said Julia.

"But it does," said Belinda. "Suppose Henry and I can never marry—or only when I'm too old to have children—don't you realize how he'd be cheated? This is the only way. The only time——"

"It would be a child without the right start," said Clare, "you must think of that, Linda."

"Stop being fantastic," said Julia, "come to your senses,

Linda! This is a dreadful situation but we shall have to face up to it. First of all, you must promise me on your honour never to see this man again. And then we must arrange for proper care and see that you get through this without any physical damage that might affect you in later life—when you marry.”

“Mother,” said Belinda, “I’m not going to have any abortion.”

Julia shivered. “You’ll come out of it all right. They’re quite safe under the right circumstances.”

“I know. I did research on abortions for an article just recently. But I want this baby. I’m responsible for it. I love it already——”

Absurdly Clare thought, this will make me a great-grandmother. How strange.

Julia spoke defensively. “Please don’t think I countenance the practice of abortions. I’ve always been definitely opposed to them until——”

“Until you don’t want a certain child to be born,” said Belinda gently. “It’s usually what they say. Not this child. But this child is wanted. I wish you could want it too, Mother.”

“I want no child under such a cloud,” said Julia.

“You talked so often about how much you care about what happens to all children. You’ve made other people care. The refugee children in Europe—so many of them were illegitimate—but you cared about them——”

“This is quite a different matter!”

“It’s a life. And it won’t be under a cloud. I won’t let that happen. My child will be happy, loved every instant. It’s the way I can make Henry go on.”

If only I had made Jerome go on, thought Clare. She’s braver, clearer than I was.

Aloud she said, “I know, Belinda. You’re right. See it through.”

Belinda was still looking at her mother. She said, “And it’s my father and your husband going on too. Do you want

me to kill that? Don't you think my father would be glad?"

Suddenly Julia broke, shrinking down into the sofa, her body racked with an agony of sobs.

Belinda went to her. She laid an arm across the tossing shoulders, bent her lips to her mother's hair. She spoke with her new sureness and authority.

"Mother is worn out, Clare, and terribly tired. Will you order up some tea and toast for her and I'll get her to lie down and rest."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SOME daffodils had blossomed in a corner of the Cowper grounds and Ben, the handyman, had brought a bunch of them inside the house. Mrs. Merrill had put some of them in a vase in the living-room and carried the rest upstairs to her own bedroom for Sylvia Cowper certainly would not notice or appreciate them. The nurse would have liked to tuck a flower into her hair as she used to do years ago when she was a girl. She tried the effect before her mirror, then removed the daffodil because she could visualize the way the cook would sneer if she went into the kitchen with such a decoration. Idly she wished that Henry Cowper could see her in her green slacks. She had the figure for slacks as few women had. The saleswoman had told her that. Mrs. Merrill was tempted sometimes when she went downstairs in the evening to watch television to simply wear a robe—her blue one was actually more of a hostess gown than anything else.

It had come to be her habit to imagine herself as mistress of this house, so much so that when she was in the city she had occasionally gone into the drapery department at Marshall Field's and had them show her fabrics.

Once she had said to Henry, "This living-room would be just beautiful done in a soft coral colour."

Henry looked up vaguely and said—"Would it?" without interest. But he was not always unobservant. When he had returned from New York this last time he had said, "You're looking fine, Mrs. Merrill, as if you've been out in the air a little." That was the cherry coloured rouge under the beige foundation. It looked very natural, especially with a little touch of liquid cream around the eyes so that she seemed unpowdered. Men liked that.

This time Henry Cowper was cheerful, almost as if he were happy to be back. He had brought two enormous boxes of candy home—obviously picked them up at the local airport terminal, but he had remembered—and one of them of course was for the nurse. And later he had said to her, "You mustn't let us overwork you, Mrs. Merrill. I want you to get all the relief you need."

Lucky that he was able to afford it, thought Mrs. Merrill. But sometimes now she rather resented the money that went to Stokes and Helm, the two practical nurses who worked with her. They were past middle age and very plain. Mrs. Merrill had chosen them. On the few occasions when one of the other nurses was alone in the house with Henry Cowper, Mrs. Merrill knew he was always glad when she herself came back and took over the reins of the household.

She had arranged the hours when Stokes and Helm were on duty so that they relieved her after eight in the evening and during the day when Mr. Cowper was at work. That gave her time to rest and shop and go to the beauty parlour or a movie, and yet be back before the man of the house returned for dinner at night. She was the only nurse who could get much response from Sylvia Cowper. The other two did what was necessary and Stokes especially was very neat and deft. But of course it was Mrs. Merrill to whom Henry Cowper turned when there was any question about his wife's condition or treatment.

He was not nearly so nervous as he had been before he went on this last trip. Since he had returned more than three weeks ago he seemed to be accepting the situation. For that

Mrs. Merrill gave herself considerable credit. He did not always come home for dinner, but when he did she saw that he was comfortable. He usually would work at his desk or sometimes read or just go into what she called a brown study, but he was becoming used to her company in the adjoining room. Sometimes she brought him a highball and he liked that. After that rite was established, she had asked Henry one night with a little laugh if he thought it would be all right if she had a very small drink herself.

"It's been a rather difficult day," she said.

"Why of course," said Henry, "help yourself."

She was careful to keep her drinks small, and after that, when she carried in a tray with two glasses on it, she served him first of course and he could see that her highball was half the size of his. She could always have another when she went upstairs.

His affair with the Congresswoman's daughter had evidently petered out or blown up. Mrs. Merrill had heard through her underground connection with Henry Cowper's office force that he no longer used that private telephone he had installed in his office on which he used to talk to the girl. He was working very hard and there had been a big write-up in one of the Sunday newspapers about the expansion of his plant and its usefulness to national defence. Mrs. Merrill had not understood the technical points but she clipped the piece out. There was a picture along with it of Henry Cowper with some other men on the new building site. Unfortunately Henry's back was to the camera, but anyone who knew him would recognize that handsome head.

He must be making money hand over fist, but the way it was spent seemed more and more unjustified to Mrs. Merrill. Sometimes when the other purses got their cheques she felt as if it were her money they were receiving. And the waste in the kitchen, the amount of food that Ben and the cook not only ate but took home to their relatives almost certainly on their days off was outrageous. Mrs. Merrill did not openly protest, because it was almost impossible to get

cooks in the suburbs and she herself drew the line at doing any cooking. But she often thought that if she had a free hand in this house, if there were no invalid upstairs, things would be very different. And what she could do with the money! A hundred and twelve dollars a week to each of the practical nurses mounted up to almost a thousand a month for them, to say nothing of the other help. You can get a beautiful mink for less than five thousand at the right time of year, Mrs. Merrill would say to herself.

The thing she could not work out in her mind to perfect satisfaction was what was the proper timing and order of events. Some day Henry Cowper would wake up and find out that he was dependent on her and that he did not want to get along without her under any circumstances. What had been first a hope in Mrs. Merrill's mind, and then a question, had developed into confidence, especially since he had come back from this last trip.

But if Sylvia Cowper was sent off to a sanatorium too soon—and it wouldn't cost half what he was spending on the woman now—before he realized what Fran Merrill did and could mean to his life, she herself might be out of touch with him. There would be a time lag—there might not be any opportunity to see Henry—and some snip of a girl in his office or somewhere else among his daily contacts might edge in. That was all those business girls lived for.

On the other hand, if she let the thing drag, and unless she managed to get Henry Cowper thinking along certain lines, this situation could go along indefinitely. She wasn't getting any younger. He must "come to realize", thought Mrs. Merrill, using the phrase which brought so many of the stories she read to a romantic ending. If he suddenly saw her as desirable, as within reach, if he waked up, the way men often did to feelings they unconsciously had but suppressed, the rest would be inevitable.

You have to manage things, she thought.

Henry Cowper came home for dinner that night. The surprising and gratifying thing was that he noticed the

daffodils. Mrs. Merrill had gone downstairs to see the eight o'clock show—Stokes was on duty now—and Henry, who had been late, came in after a few minutes with the newspaper he had been reading in the dining-room. He stopped at the table where she had placed the daffodils and looked at them. Then he smiled and the boyish look came into his face.

"Yellow as a daffodil," he said, aloud but as if to himself.

"Aren't they sweet? So springy," said Mrs. Merrill.

"Nice colour," said Henry.

"I'm so glad you like them. I had Ben cut them because sometimes I think a house needs a touch of colour."

Henry did not comment on that. He went into the next room and unfolded the paper again. But Mrs. Merrill did not believe he was reading. He was too still and she heard no rustle of paper. She was sure that her thoughtfulness had touched the poor fellow. He was probably reviewing the situation, wishing, perhaps even beginning to realize—this might be a good time to make a suggestion.

When she could be certain that Sarah had finished in the kitchen and gone to her own room, for the cook was snoop and unable to mind her own business, Mrs. Merrill went out and made a couple of highballs. Henry Cowper was at his desk now and the boyish look had disappeared. He was working with figures.

"Still at work? After your long day?"

"It's something to do," said Henry. "Oh, thanks, Mrs. Merrill. Get one for yourself?"

"Just a teeny one. You shouldn't wear yourself out, Mr. Cowper. You know what they say—all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

"A very dull boy," said Henry, "but I guess that doesn't matter in my case."

"Oh you mustn't say that, Mr. Cowper. You mustn't allow yourself to feel that way. Or be depressed. Of course I realize—perhaps better than anyone else—how difficult your situation is."

"Don't bother about me. You take care of your patient. Not that it isn't kind of you, Mrs. Merrill," added Henry, for his first words and tone had been abrupt.

"A patient to me," said Mrs. Merrill, "always involves more than a physical or mental condition. I never can help seeing the family situation, the griefs and strains created by illness. If you have a sympathetic nature, Mr. Cowper, if you like people, as I do, it sometimes wrings your heart."

"I suppose so," said Henry, "you must run up against some tough deals in your work."

"I always keep trying to see what may be best for my patients. To watch for changes that might alter a diagnosis or treatment—as in this case perhaps."

"Is there anything new? In Mrs. Cowper's condition?" he asked with the quick apprehension she had often seen before.

She sat down on the edge of a chair facing him, not letting herself relax.

"Only that I am afraid that our little lady is not making much progress. And if there is no improvement——"

"It's downhill," said Henry into her pause. "But the doctor said, when he was last here, that there's nothing to worry about physically."

"I'm sure of that. What I wonder sometimes, Mr. Cowper—now I hope you won't think I'm overstepping—I probably shouldn't say anything but this has been on my mind."

"Go ahead. I'd like to hear what you think."

"I only question whether this treatment—this environment—is best for Mrs. Cowper. Have you ever considered placing her in a sanatorium?"

"Oh, we've tried that. Long before you came to the house. She was very unhappy there."

"Of course morbidity is part of her condition. A symptom. But there are excellent institutions—I know some of them from experience—which take these cases."

He frowned. "What's the trouble? You're tired of the job?"

"No—not that—I'd do anything for Mrs. Cowper, although of course as I've told you I didn't expect to stay on this case for so long. But if I'm needed—if you feel that you need me, Mr. Cowper, my personal inclination doesn't come first. On the other hand, I cannot help feeling that if something constructive could be done—if I could make the situation easier for you—I should make the suggestion. I know it is very expensive for you—and frankly, it may go on for years like this——"

"I know that," said Henry.

"Perhaps you should think more of yourself, Mr. Cowper. As they say, the living should not be sacrificed to—well, the incurably ill."

"Don't worry about that, Mrs. Merrill. I'm adjusted to the prospect."

"Would you like me to get you the names of one or two good sanatoriums—you could look them over—and I could tell you about them."

Henry stood up. He walked away from her and back again. He finally said, "I don't think so, Mrs. Merrill. Unless it should become quite impossible to care for my wife in her home, I won't consider anything else. I appreciate your interest. But as I see it, about all I can do for Mrs. Cowper is to maintain a home for her."

"If she were in a condition to enjoy it—to take notice——"

"Perhaps we don't know about that. There may be something she feels and doesn't express—isn't able to express," said Henry. He didn't terminate the discussion and the nurse stayed where she was, feeling that an intimacy was growing. The glasses on the table, the sympathy she had given him, she'd had her hair done only yesterday, he'd noticed the jonquils——

"Mrs. Cowper," said Henry, "liked her own house. When she was able to do it, she enjoyed using it. Parties, things like that. She had a great deal of interest in her dishes, silver, equipment, you know what I mean. Those things are very important to some women. They were to her. To get some-

thing a decorator suggested to her or that her guests admired was always a sort of triumph for her. To a woman like yourself, such possessions wouldn't mean much, I suppose, but they did to her. I tell you this merely to explain why I don't want to take her out of her own house. Maybe she's lost track completely and doesn't know that she is here among the things she accumulated. But maybe down deep there's a little satisfaction, or feeling of safety, for her in that. Anyway, the least I can do—the only thing—is to go on the assumption that it does mean something to her. So I think we'll go along on the present basis and see how we come out."

Mrs. Merrill said, "You're certainly a wonderful husband, Mr. Cowper."

He made an almost rough sound of dissent and quickly picked up his glass for a drink.

"I hope you'll stay by the ship, Mrs. Merrill."

"I'll try if you feel you need me."

"I certainly do. And if there's anything that will improve the mechanics for you, let me know. I hope you'll regard this as your home while you're here. Now I guess I'll call it a day. Will you turn off the lights? Good night."

It was a pleasure to turn off the lights later on, as if it were her own home. But Mrs. Merrill stayed downstairs for a while, thinking over the conversation and savouring bits of it. He was certainly aware that he needed her. He admired her. "To a woman like yourself," he had said. At least she had sown the seed of the sanatorium idea and before too long she would bring it up again. Sylvia Cowper would go to pieces pretty quickly under some conditions. He sensed that. But there was no use in being a fool.

He admired her. It was only a step from that to—he must think of me as a woman, not as his wife's nurse, thought Mrs. Merrill. The memory of a dress she had seen in a window on North Michigan Avenue came temptingly into her mind. She had priced it last week but it was too expensive. It cost a hundred and sixty-nine dollars and she had no place to wear it, she had decided. But, reconsidering, it wasn't too formal

to wear anywhere, even to put on sometimes in the evening here.

It was a cocktail dress, the saleswoman had said, but it had little sleeves and the colour was soft green, which was always wonderful with her hair. The neckline wasn't too low, just plunged a little. He would be startled and surprised. She would say, laughingly, "One gets so tired of white and starch—I hope you don't mind—you were so good to tell me to make myself at home and I love to change in the evening when I'm off duty."

Of course the dress was probably sold by this time. Suddenly it was of paramount importance that it shouldn't be gone. Mrs. Merrill wanted that dress and, after all, she was making very good money. A dress like that would be an investment. What was the schedule here in the house tomorrow? She had juggled it a little to suit herself and Helm wasn't due until four. That would be too late to get into Chicago while the shops were open. If she could get away at three—but it was impossible to reach Helm and tell her to come earlier for she was staying with a cousin who didn't have a phone. She could call the shop and ask them to hold the dress for her. They probably wouldn't. They didn't know her and for that price she must try it on and be sure. Maybe I can get off by three, thought Mrs. Merrill. That's when she has her nap anyhow.

She slept restlessly that night and was on duty early, attending with perfection to every need of the invalid. But as her hands were busy, her mind stayed on the dress. At a quarter to three she looked into the kitchen.

"Sarah, I'm going now."

"Is Mrs. Helm here?"

"She'll be here at four. And I have an appointment with the dentist I must keep. They're so hard to get, and I have to catch the three-ten train. Mrs. Cowper has had her medicine and she'll be napping until Helm comes. If you should hear her moving, Sarah, run up and see if she wants anything."

"I'm not the nurse," said Sarah.

"I know that, Sarah," said Mrs. Merrill sweetly, "I just mention it in case."

The cook heard nothing. It was a well-built house and sounds did not penetrate. Mrs. Merrill was on the train when a thought came disturbingly into her mind. Had she taken the keys out of the bathroom cabinet after she gave Sylvia Cowper her pill? Surely she must have. She always did. It was automatic with her. She reassured herself. She couldn't go back now.

CHAPTER TWENTY

WHEN her mother was calmer, Belinda had asked her to spend the night at her apartment and together they had left the hotel. Clare did not know whether they would talk more about Belinda's situation. She doubted that they would. There were words, even truths, that should not be repeated and Belinda would have the instinct and skill and also the tenderness to avoid them.

Clare herself was sleepless that night. But the direction of her concern surprised her. She thought of Belinda, of how protection and care could be provided for her, of places in Europe where it would be possible to live quietly for a year. She thought, I could go with Belinda. If she wants me. If she is willing to go. She has no idea of the practical situation she is facing, Clare told herself, but she did not convince herself of that. Her worry for Belinda was mixed with pride in her, and also with the curious envy Clare had felt before.

It was Julia for whom Clare ached with pain, Julia who seemed to be seriously hurt. And the injury had been begun long ago. Clare knew now that she was responsible for it. The hurt had been concealed so long that Clare had to search for the beginnings of it among her own memories. It forced her, at last, during those long night hours, to put the events of her life in chronological order, to consider happenings in

their calendar time. She had put so much away for good when she married Jerome. There were so many things she thought she need never use again. Never bother with again. Carelessly piled things, one hiding another, unlabelled.

We embarrassed Julia, she thought. I didn't know that. I think I didn't. Or knowing it, did I ignore it? She realized that our situation wasn't normal and Julia always loved regularity and conformity. Most children do. We were so wrapped up in ourselves, so high-handed in our love, that I neglected Julia. Not that she ever wanted for anything. Not for anything material, you mean, face up to that. I loved Jerome so much that there wasn't enough left over for Julia. And he was very kind to her but he never was close to her. Perhaps he knew that she resented him. Jerome was quite different with Belinda, in spite of the extra generation between them.

Jerome didn't want children. When we married I was too old to start another family and so was he. Sometimes before that I used to want his child—we talked about it, but it was too flagrant a thing to allow to happen. Yet if I had insisted, if it had happened, would he have been glad in the end? The continuance of a man, Belinda said tonight. If I had borne Jerome's child, his life would be going on today. He wouldn't be gone as he is now, finished. But illegitimate? That's not fair to the child. Is that an excuse? Or is life itself more important than all the rules we make about the way to live it? Isn't it? If I had kept Jerome alive, continued him—was anything else, our reputation, his pride—even our happiness—as important as that would have been?

His child would be tall, like that picture of Jerome that I love, the one taken long before I met him, which shows how sensitive and eager he was at twenty. It would have been a boy. Jerome said, "If you and I can ever have a child, let's make it a boy. You have a girl." We tossed the idea around because it was exciting, but we were careful that it never got beyond the idea. The fact would have scandalized Jerome. Belinda knows that Henry Cowper will be horrified—he's

bound to be. But that isn't going to stop her. She's seemingly docile but so firm. And grave. She's sent him back to his deranged wife and she says she doesn't intend to see him again unless there is an emergency. Poor child—how long will they hold out? Europe is the solution for her, at least the first step in a solution.

But no matter what can be done, Julia will suffer. She's never been a realist. She's always thought life could be managed by laws and rules. She's not in the least like her father. He was a truthful rascal. Julia's more like me when I was in college. She believes all those speeches she makes. As I did that brash Commencement speech I made once.

Julia will always love Belinda because Belinda loves her. That came through tonight. But Julia will never forgive me, not quite, and I must always pretend I don't know, that. I must see her again soon and get that money settled on her. It's all I can do. It's all I ever did do for her. But it will give her independence if nothing else. Tomorrow morning I'll talk to Belinda and Julia and make another appointment with poor astonished Phil. Not immediately. Julia may need a little time, and I won't hurry her.

* * *

When the postponed legal conference took place several weeks later, it went off with surface smoothness at least. Clare had long since told Philip Merton that the fuss about the girl's whereabouts had been a tempest in a teapot. She told him the facts as if they amounted to nothing unusual. Belinda had been off on a prolonged week-end and was too busy when she came back to read all her mail for a few days. Belinda Rood was looking extremely well at the conference and she had the same charming manner that Merton had noticed when she had been at his house.

Julia Rood pleased his taste less. She was a very handsome woman but Merton felt that she lacked the appreciation which could be expected on receiving what was a consider-

able gift of money. She acted as if she were entitled to it. Clare had probably told her that story about the money coming from an agency which her father had started, but that of course was nonsense. Clare had made the money and need not make any distribution until her own death. Tax-wise, of course, this was sensible. Mrs. Rood was courteous and very intelligently aware of the values of the securities which were being given to her. But she was not a woman with much feminine charm. No doubt, thought Philip, because she's been so immersed in politics. However, she's very presentable, even distinguished. I'd never be ashamed of the connection. Then, realizing where his thoughts were wandering and that they were out of proper sequence, he gave his full attention to the matter in hand.

Belinda's glowing gratitude made up for any reserve in her mother's manner. Belinda told Philip that she didn't need the money, and she had never expected to be so rich and that it would be wonderful to have the income. She was delightfully happy, obviously dreaming already of how she would spend it.

"It will be useful when you begin to shop for a trousseau," said Philip, interrupting his legal statements with that little pleasantry.

But he noticed that Julia Rood suddenly stiffened, almost paled. Philip realized that he must have touched on some family problem or disagreement, perhaps one that concerned a clash of opinion as to whom the girl should marry. Possibly her mother thought she could do better than the Sulgrave boy—politically minded women often were caught up in that transient Washington whirl and did not have sound social values. But if she asks me, thought Philip, I could tell her that the Sulgraves are an excellent connection, even if there isn't much money in that branch of the family.

Clare, he observed, was looking chic as always, but somewhat tired. He had seen her a few times in these last weeks but always in too large a group to allow him enough personal conversation with her. Slowly a plan, a new arrangement,

was shaping in his mind. His disapproval of Clare's resuming professional work in New York was very definite. What necessity was there for that? Why wear herself out as if she were a widow needing money? Clare was at her best as a hostess. And why should she associate with people who, when all was said and done, had no real standing except in unusual cases? Take Lee Havighurst—he'd been posted again for non-payment of dues at the club. Philip Merton regretted having asked him to dine, when he saw his name on the board.

"I believe that concludes our business for the time being," said Philip. "I shall proceed to make the stock transfers, Mrs. Rood. Also the annuity for Belinda will be in her name before many weeks pass. It takes a little time to make the changes but I shall keep you informed. Clare, have you any other instructions for me?"

"Only to ask you to send me the statement of your fee when it's convenient."

"My fee, my dear Clare, is the privilege of doing a little work that my old friend Jerome would like me to do for his family, I hope."

"Oh no, that's imposing on you, Phil!"

"May we leave it that way?" he asked with decision under the courtesy.

"But it's such a big favour."

"I'm going to ask one of you in return. Will you dine with me next Thursday night at the house? Quite *en famille*. I'll ask no one else."

"That's compounding favours for me," she said, smiling, and Merton felt a pleasant anticipation that was almost excitement.

He inquired, "You are going back to Washington today, Mrs. Rood?"

"Yes, almost immediately."

"The penalty for important work must usually be paid in the coin of time," said Philip. "But I can imagine how interesting and absorbing your brilliant career must be."

"I have this term in the House to finish," said Julia, "it probably will be my last in Washington."

Again something was wrong. Merton saw the almost pleading glance that went from Belinda towards her mother. Clare had lost her smile. He made no more comments on Mrs. Rood's political life.

There was still a lingering constraint between the others as they said good-bye outside the building. Julia signalled a cab.

"Can I drop you anywhere, Clare?"

"No, I'm walking. I need the exercise."

Belinda said, "Shall I drive out to the airport with you, Mother?"

"Have you time?"

"Yes, I've the whole afternoon off. I'd like to. Good-bye, Clare. I don't know how to thank you for what you've done today. I love you—and Jerome—for it. And for so many other reasons."

"You've been generous, Clare," said Julia.

But that won't make Julia approve of me, thought Clare. She tried to be amused, not to feel deserted as they left her. She was glad to see them go together. Belinda was doing all she could to make up for what Julia was enduring now, and what she must bear in the future. Has she really made up her mind not to run for Congress again, wondered Clare. Why must she punish herself? She's not done any wrong. Shall I try to persuade her? No, I cannot help Julia except with the money. She wouldn't trust my judgment. She couldn't find the basis for it in her manual. No more could I.

Belinda would be all right now as far as money went. It would be a kind of protection. But quite gently Belinda already had rejected the idea of going to Europe with Clare until after her child was born.

"I think I'd rather stay in New York," she had told Clare, "I'll be able to work for a long time yet. And then I ought to be here. I want him to be born in his own country. I believe that, if——"

"I understand," said Clare and stopped the discussion. For she knew that what Belinda believed was that Henry Cowper—if he had known—would want his child to be born in the United States.

There was nothing more she could do for Belinda. She doesn't need me, thought Clare. Nobody does. The streets were thick with people but to Clare they were empty of contact. Empty of interest and duty. Suddenly she was conscious of a weariness that was new and frightening. It was mental and physical. She had never felt so tired. It was not the fatigue that came after sleeplessness or overwork or dissipation. It was a kind of indifference to going any farther, to walking even the distance to the next corner, to looking for a cab. It seemed as if uselessness, purposelessness and loneliness were smothering her and the lack of being needed had blotted out all energy. She had told Claude she would come to his office this afternoon when she was through with her other meeting. She was on her way there now. But she couldn't go farther. She hadn't the strength. I'd better sit down, she thought vaguely. Anywhere. There must be some place around here where I can stop and rest.

There was a department store just ahead. It would have a rest room. She went through the twirling doors, down the crowded aisles, packed herself into an elevator and on the third floor found at length the empty chair with plastic covering that she had known would be there, that all women who were getting old and became suddenly tired counted on being there. Clare sank down on its tough cushion. The paper packages in the lap of the woman on one side of her crackled, the woman on the other side spread her knees for comfort. Clare joined them, seized at rest too. She thought, I don't care how I look, and in that moment touched the bottom of the desolation which had been sucking her down into it.

"Tired, dear?" asked the woman with the widespread knees.

"Yes," said Clare, "I don't know why."

"It can come over you like that," said the woman, "I play out all of a sudden sometimes too. Now that I have to do for myself. My husband died just last year."

"I'm sorry," said Clare, "I'm very sorry."

"Thank you, dear. Actually, I get more tired now than I did when I had a whole house to look after and now I've just the one room."

"I know how that is," said Clare.

"Well, I guess it comes to all of us." The woman pulled herself up heavily. "I'd better go if I expect to get a seat on the bus before the rush hour starts. Good-bye, dear. Watch yourself."

Clare closed her eyes. The woman on the other side crackled off with her bundles. Clare thought, I'm more tired too than when I had a house to look after. It was a lovely house. Belinda said it lived so well. And it was alive. Her thoughts took on colour and movement. She could see the sweeping coral curtains on the staircase landing and now Jerome was coming up with his sure tread, calling her name, finding her in her dressing-room—what shall I wear tonight? Dinner will be at home—we like that best—we always congratulate each other on being alone—it's not too often—we savour it, and there are special hot appetizers tonight—he will go out and tell Minna how good they are. No wonder people always like to work in our house. The house is full of affection, safe in devotion—the Irish silver is always beautifully polished. The house has the generous feel of a country house though it's on the edge of the city—we planned it that way.

What am I doing in this rest room? In New York? On the streets like a tramp? How ashamed Jerome would be if he could see me here. He'd be sickened. He thought I was so safe. I was safe until he died. Until I had to do for myself, as that woman said. I've not done well for myself. Nor for Jerome.

It was half an hour before she stood up and went over to the wall mirror. She looked untidy but the exhaustion had passed. Clare washed her hands, put on fresh lipstick and

drew on her gloves. On her way out she passed the chair where she had been sitting and gave it 'a little grateful pat. She looked at her watch. There was still time to get to Claude's office.

Claude had become more adjusted to doing without Mary Floyd in the last weeks. His leathery face had its old calm look and the eyes, far behind the thick lenses, gave Clare her familiar welcome.

He said, "You're looking very tempting today."

"Good for me," said Clare, "I'm remarkable."

"I've always thought so. And you certainly did a good job on the Havighurst book."

"He's through, Claude, you know that."

"He'll never believe it. I wangled an advance for him. And did you know he is going to get married again?"

"Is he? Who?"

"Some rich woman. Drumm—something like that."

"Oh—poor Jean!"

"You know her?"

"I know her mother," said Clare, "his future mother-in-law. Who doesn't know that anyone like Lee exists. It will be hard for her."

"Funny the way things tie up."

"Funnier the way they untie," said Clare. "I came in to tell you, Claude, that I'm not going to keep on with any job in the agency. Not even a small one."

"I wish you would, Clare."

But today there was no urgency in the wish. Her intuition felt even a faint relief in his protest. It hurt—not very much.

"Have you tried to get Hatty Simpson?" she asked.

"I had a word with her," he admitted. "I've an idea that she might like the connection. But if there's any chance that you yourself would reconsider——"

"I'm very sure I won't. You'd better nail her down at once if she's available. How old is she?"

"Thirtyish."

"That's the age you need," said Clare.

Yes, she was quite sure that he was relieved. It hardly hurt at all.

"You're always right," he said. "Since you say so, I'll try her out. And I'll be eternally grateful for all the help you've given me since Mary died."

"It was fun," said Clare, "in a nostalgic way. But I have to think of my future."

"What are your plans? What are you going to do with yourself now?"

"I'm going back home."

"Not back to those widows!"

She laughed. She said, "I can't escape them here, Claude. Turn myself upwards, turn myself downwards, everywhere they wait for me. And they have their good points. They do for themselves. They play out but they go on. They're often very friendly too."

"I still beg you to write that piece on widows."

"I couldn't," said Clare, "and you couldn't sell it if I did. They'd say it was special pleading."

She did not stay long in the office. Claude would have things to do. Now that she was not working, she was only taking up time he needed. As she left, she thought of Mary's diligent face in that corner. Somebody had to think of Mary Floyd.

Where would she go now? Where did she want to go? She knew. She wanted to go back to the hotel, where she could think about Jerome.

* * *

The telephone in her room rang sharply and brought her back to time and place. What hour was it? Almost ten o'clock? She must have fallen asleep, sitting here.

She lifted the receiver.

"Mrs. Jerome Tarrant, please. Long distance calling."

"This is she."

"One minute please. I have Mrs. Jerome Tarrant on the line, sir."

"Thank you." It was a man's voice, vaguely familiar. But whose was it?

"Is this Mrs. Tarrant?"

"Yes."

"This is Henry Cowper. In Chicago."

"Oh?"

"I must apologize for calling you but I didn't know what else to do. I cannot reach Belinda at her apartment. Her telephone doesn't answer."

"That's probably just as well," said Clare coldly.

"There's something she must know," said Henry Cowper, as if the tone of her voice made no difference. His own was urgent. "I want her to know it tonight. And I can't keep on trying to get her on the telephone. There are so many things I have to do here. My wife is dead, Mrs. Tarrant. She died this afternoon. Will you tell Belinda?"

"Died? I'm so sorry." The words came with no meaning. "Was she ill? I thought you didn't expect——"

"It was an accident. I hope that we'll be allowed to call it that. What happened—I would like Belinda to know the truth—was that my wife took an overdose of sedatives. There was always some danger of that but we had taken precautions—they were locked up. And she was never left alone. So I thought. One of the nurses was criminally careless. Of course my wife wasn't responsible. I trusted the nurse too far—it was my fault—Mrs. Tarrant, do you know where Belinda is?"

"Not at the moment but I'll find her. I'll tell her."

"And could you ask her to understand why I may not be in touch with her for a little while—there are obligations——"

This was Jerome talking. This was the way he had sounded twenty years ago. Stern, decent——

"Of course she'll understand. Don't worry about that. Don't give anything else but your loss a thought now," she

said to Henry Cowper as she had said to Jerome once in almost the same words.

"And when you talk to Belinda," the grave, weary voice pleaded, "if you could make her feel—I want her to know—if you would——"

"I will," said Clare, "I'll tell her that you love her, Henry."

She was trembling as she broke the connection. She took a few minutes to believe it, to throw off the fears and pain that had ceased with the life of that unfortunate woman she had never seen. The present and the past had to be untangled and vivid glimpses of the future flashed like lightning in a storm. She did small things that needed doing, emptied an ashtray, threw the newspapers she had read into the wastebasket, straightened a lamp shade and it was still true. She must go to Belinda personally and tell her this. If necessary she would wait in the vestibule of her apartment until the girl returned. And she must be told carefully and slowly. There must be no shock for Belinda in her condition.

Belinda had just come home when Clare arrived. She said that after she had left her mother at Idlewild she had come back on the bus. It was a long ride. Belinda looked tired.

"And I stopped for some coffee at a place. I was thinking about things."

"This is a mad time to drop in on you," said Clare, "but I wanted to have a talk. And I didn't want to do it on the telephone."

"I'm so glad you did come," said Belinda. "Would you like a drink or something?"

"Maybe later. You got your mother off all right?"

Belinda said, "Yes, she got off. Oh, Clare, I feel so cruel. It's so hard on her. It's going to ruin her life. If I could only make her believe that mine isn't ruined——"

"Of course it isn't," said Clare, "neither is Julia's. Sit down and relax. This is the first time I've seen your apartment. It's charming. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I'm fine."

Clare picked up the lighter on the table, remembering. Jerome would press it, then look up to see if she had an unlit cigarette. Then the flame would light up his firm face. He would take time, he had no nervous habits. He liked plenty of time for everything. For breakfast, for decisions, for making love. Don't think of that now. I must tell her. In a minute I will.

"Isn't that a celestial globe? And a very nice one. Really old. Where did you ever find that?"

"Henry found it. He knew that I wanted one. He hunted all over for it."

"It's a treasure."

"A ball for baby," said Belinda and her laugh cracked open with pain—"I wish my happiness weren't misery for other people! Mother—Henry——"

Clare sat down and held out her hand. The girl's head soon was on her shoulder and she held the frail, desolate body close, as never before.

"It's hard but you're going to be happy——"

"I was—I had my share——"

"Just a taste of your share so far. Linda, I talked to Henry tonight."

"To Henry! Is he in New York?"

"No, he called me from Chicago."

"He called you?" said Belinda incredulously.

"Yes, because he couldn't reach you. He wanted me to tell you something. He sent you his love."

"Is he all right?"

"He sounded tired. Belinda, his wife died today."

"His wife——" whispered Belinda and was on her feet, her face ghostly. "Oh, poor Henry!"

"Strange," said Clare, "I felt that way when Jerome's wife died."

"What happened to Henry's wife? She was quite strong—I mean——"

She didn't even hear what I said about Jerome, thought Clare. But for her there's no echo.

"Henry said it was an accident. An overdose of something. She did it herself, Belinda. In a fog mentally, I suppose, from what I've heard of her condition."

"Poor thing——"

"That's right, Belinda. Begin with pity for her. The rest will come. And you must give Henry time. Any such break, any separation, even when it's been a burden——"

"He'll think he didn't do enough for her."

"Probably he will. He's a good man. You must make him feel that he did all he could."

I did that well, she thought. I convinced Jerome of that. It took a little time.

Belinda said, "Now everything is different. He may think we should have waited. He may be sorry. I thought I was right. Perhaps I was wrong. He could even feel——" she said with dread.

"Belinda," said Clare, "you must believe him. He sent you his love."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SITTING with Philip Merton in his eighteenth-century drawing-room, Clare tasted a comfort as delicious as the dinner had been. This was the happiest evening she had spent in New York since she had arrived so many weeks ago. The secrets she carried in her mind freed her for perfect enjoyment tonight. There was the memory of Belinda as she had seen her yesterday. The girl's face had seemed more mobile, her spirit less single-track, her eyes more compassionate, as if she had looked down paths of life that were not her own. Clare would have liked to talk to Philip about it for he understood the variation of life well and was patient with almost everything except bad manners. But Belinda's story was not Clare's to tell, nor was the fact that Julia's path had been cleared of obstacles a proper part of their conversation.

She was grateful for Philip's company. It was good not to be alone tonight, to associate with maturity, to dip into memories, to feel beautiful in his eyes. And he so obviously wanted her to be here. He had prepared the progress of this evening with a meticulous care she found touching. Clare thought, Jerome was right, Philip is good company. In the best sense of both words. Jerome saw his natural kindness and wisdom under the arrangements.

They had finished their liqueurs in the tiny Russian glasses

and she had refused to spoil the taste with another cigarette. The room was quiet and for a moment they did not interrupt their own peace. Then Philip spoke.

"I wanted to be alone with you, tonight, Clare, because I wanted to distill and savour what seems to me the essence of good company."

"I've loved it every minute."

"You don't exaggerate when you say that?"

"I understate," she said, smiling at him, "and I love your perfected phrases too."

He looked at her, then away. He seems a little shy, she thought. It's not at all like him. And then suddenly she knew why it was even before he told her.

"To be frank with you, dear Clare, until recently I had no thought of marrying again. I am far from young and addicted, I'm afraid, to my own habits of life. So I have given this matter a great deal of thought before becoming presumptuous enough to put it before you——"

"Dear Phil, perhaps it would be better if you didn't."

"You must let a lawyer finish his plea," he said, "state his argument. I have considered what I have to offer a charming lady. If indeed I have anything at all to offer. Certainly I would not make demands unsuitable to my age or intrusions that would disturb her privacy. But perhaps I could offer a pleasant environment—this house and the one at East Hampton are livable. Perhaps a companionship which I would try not to make tedious——"

"I like to be with you, Phil."

"I have dared to hope that might be true. If you feel even a faint reflection of my own pleasure I am delighted. When you have been here—rarely but with a curious lasting effect—when I've seen you in your hotel rooms or in my office—I find that I am refreshed. I have taken great satisfaction in the little guardianship of your affairs that you allowed me. I must say that it seems to me both unnecessary and unsuitable to work in that literary brokerage business—or in any other commercial venture——"

"I'm not going to do that, Phil. I'm out of the agency. I told Claude that yesterday."

"I'm very glad to hear that. So—what might have been an obstacle does not exist."

"Not that obstacle."

"Another thing I must mention is my admiration for your family. It would always be a pleasure to have your daughter or your charming granddaughter with"—he paused and the word came out with gallantry—"us."

"You're so kind, Phil. I'm overwhelmed."

"That's my argument, Clare. I wish you would marry me. I hope that you will."

As he had spoken, Clare had felt the charm of what he put before her, spread for her to look at. It was a tasteful arrangement. It had beauty. There would be no falsity. It would be a life with someone I can trust, she thought. To live in this house, to share the beauty, help him plan would be so pleasant. It would be so safe. I'd not be alone. I'd have a gentleman for an escort, she thought wistfully. He has his work and he'd come home in the evening—and then she heard Jerome coming up his stairs, Jerome coming home, still passionate, always in love—oh, nothing less——

"You would like time to think about this, I know. I don't expect——"

Clare stirred. "No, Phil, I don't need time. Please believe me. I wish I could marry you. But I can't."

"I would try very hard not to be a charge upon you."

"It's not that. I would like to take care of you, Phil."

"Then why not let me put myself in your beautiful hands?"

"I don't belong here. I must go home."

"To St. Ives? But your life there is over. You have no family there."

"I have my citadel," she said, "that's what Jerome used to call our house."

"I'm sure it's a charming house," said Philip, "any residence of yours would be. But you tell me it's large—and

that your friends and advisers think you should get rid of it—I can fully understand that they fear you will eventually find it a burden.”

“Perhaps,” said Clare, “after a while. Sooner or later I’ll probably break my hip, get some ailment, have to live in an apartment or maybe a nursing home. But I’m not going back just to a house, Phil. The citadel Jerome built for me is mental and spiritual—and I deserted it when I came down here. In a way I’m going back to him.”

“My dear,” said Philip, “isn’t that sentiment? Nostalgia?”

“No. I came to New York to get away from being widowed, from the queer shame of it, the feeling of being a derelict. There’s a bruise on your pride that comes from not being first with some man, your own man. It is the end of your personal life to be widowed.”

“To some extent I had that in mind. It is not right or suitable for you to be alone. That is why I wish you would consider what I would try to offer, try to compensate——”

“Phil,” said Clare, “there are some women who stay wives even after they are widowed. I’m one of them. I love Jerome.”

He said nothing.

“I hoped,” said Clare, “that I could get back into life without him. That’s why I tried my old job. It’s why the thought of marrying you was so alluring. But neither thing is right for me. I must stay where I belong. What I mean is that I must be the person I really am. There isn’t a lot of time left and I want to live it without pretence. I’m a normal woman, not very talented. I loved being married. I have to be widowed.”

“To be unsatisfied?”

“I won’t be. What I’ve been thinking about Jerome is that he always gave people a sense of safety because he had such a sense of his place in life. Not in the electric company, I don’t mean that. But in life. He knew what his task was—his duty—as when, much as he loved me he tried desperately to keep his wife alive, though it meant we were separated.

He was so proud when he thought he had done it and I didn't resent it. That's long past but something that happened recently made it vivid to me again, alive. When I'm in my right place, he's very real. Jerome used to say, 'Don't forget me.' He knew I'd better not, that I'd destroy myself, deteriorate—yes, even with you, Phil, if I forgot Jerome."

Philip said, with no artifice, not arguing, "My dear, my dear Clare, there are no fields of amaranth on this side of the grave. And Landor wrote also, 'there is no name with whatever emphasis of passionate love repeated of which the echo is not faint at last'."

"But I still can hear it," said Clare.

"Jerome was always very proud to be your husband," said Philip Merton. "I understand why."

* * *

Harry was the man on duty in the elevator when she went up to her room. He looked at her admiringly. Her wrap fell back over her beautiful shoulders and she was smiling as if she had been having a very happy evening. She asked him about his children.

"Just fine, Mrs. Tarrant. I'm sure you're enjoying your stay in New York."

"I have very much," said Clare, "but this is almost the end of it."

"You're not going to leave us? "

"Yes," said Clare, "I'm going back to St. Ives in a few days. We still have a home out there."

The echo was faint but she heard it.

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